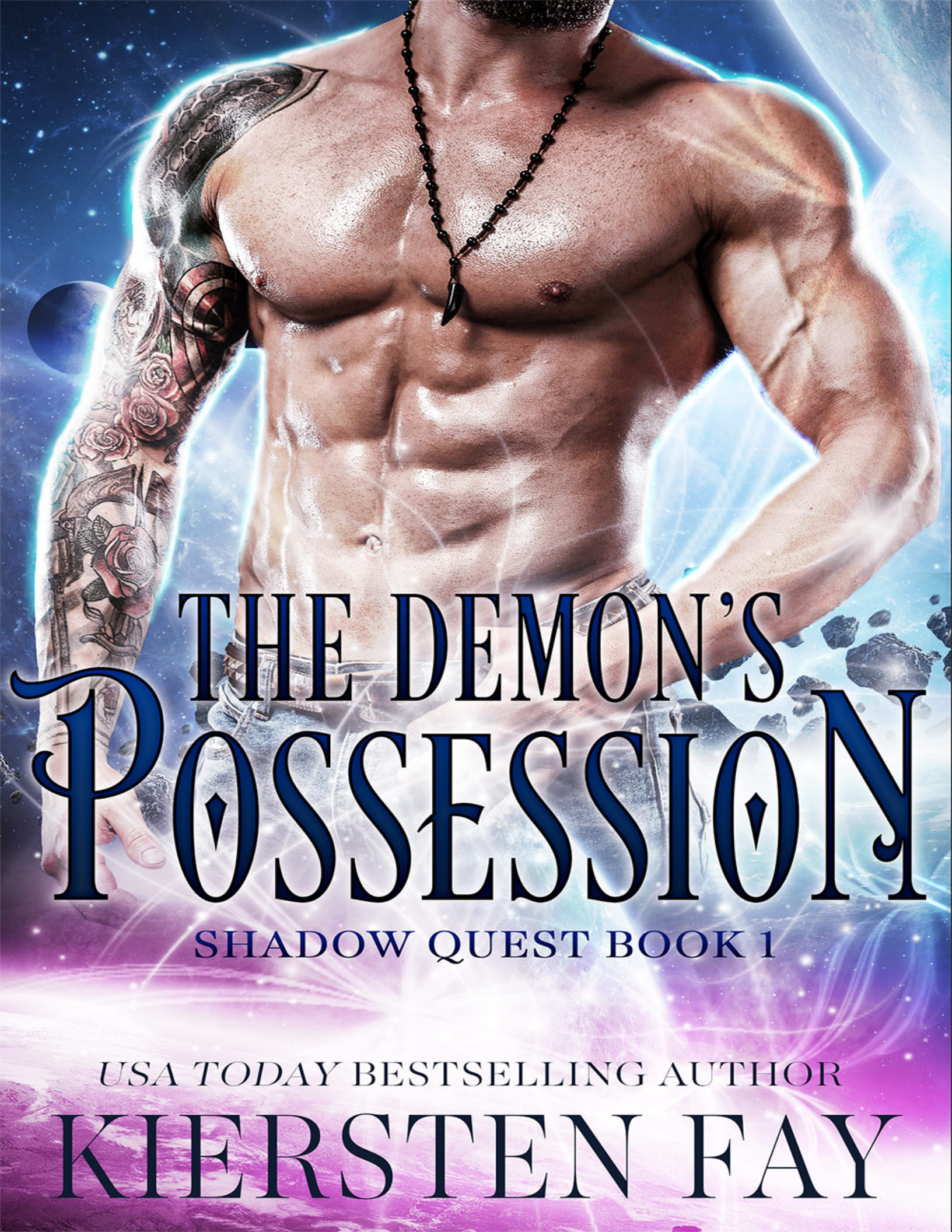


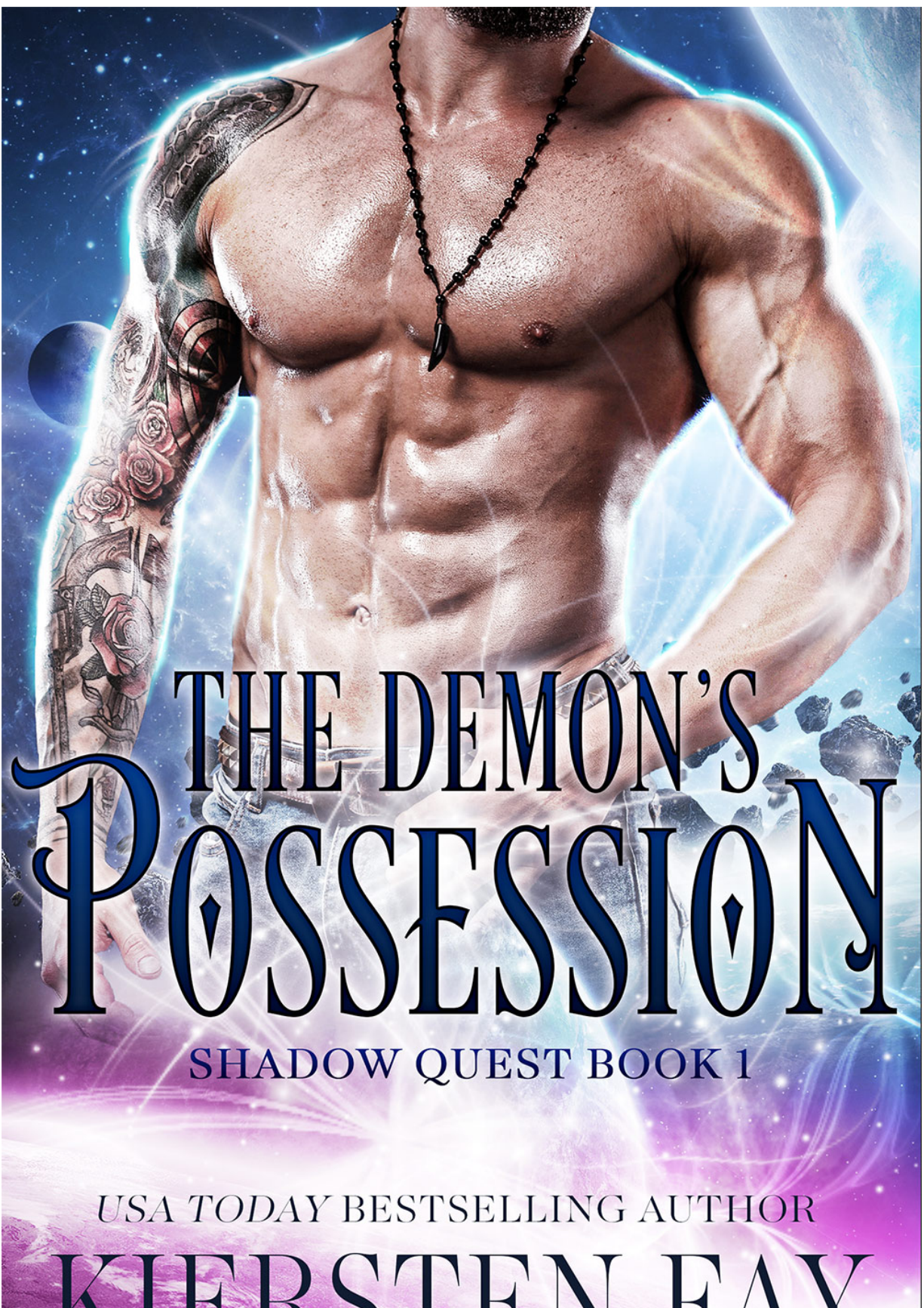
A muscular man with a black beaded necklace and a large tattoo on his left arm is shown from the chest up. He is wearing a watch on his left wrist. The background is a vibrant cosmic scene with a blue and purple nebula, stars, and a planet. The title 'THE DEMON'S POSSESSION' is written in a large, blue, serif font across the center of the image.

THE DEMON'S POSSESSION

SHADOW QUEST BOOK 1

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KIERSTEN FAY





THE DEMON'S POSSESSION

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Epilogue](#)

[Enjoy this Sample From THE DEMON SLAVE](#)

[The Demon Slave - Chapter 1](#)

[The Demon Slave - Chapter 2](#)

[The Demon Slave - Chapter 3](#)

[The Demon Slave - Chapter 4](#)

[Sneak Peek from TEMPTING THE DRAGON KING](#)

[TEMPTING THE DRAGON KING - CHAPTER 1](#)
[TEMPTING THE DRAGON KING - CHAPTER 2](#)
[TEMPTING THE DRAGON KING - CHAPTER 3](#)

[Other Books By Kiersten Fay](#)

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*This book is dedicated to Steven
for your amazing love and support.*

CHAPTER 1



*A*nalía crouched in the shadows of the docking bay—shaking with fear, anticipation—hidden behind a large pile of cargo. Heavy adrenaline coursed through her veins, making her heart pump violently. Damp blond curls tangled around her face, falling toward her ragged excuse for clothing and dirty bare feet. She struggled to steady her breath, afraid someone might hear. Her body threatened to collapse under the weight of the ship's artificial gravity as fatigue began to set in.

The sounds of the ship, like a living thing, enveloped her, embracing her both as an old friend and hated foe.

Soon she would be free.

She hoped.

It was the only thing that drove her on.

She'd known a merchant ship would be docking today. Two or three ships were scheduled every few days, in order to maintain a variety of stock. In space, no two merchants offered the same supplies, which meant many ships were often commissioned simultaneously.

She watched with frustration as the blond guard stood sentinel mere feet from her. As she hid, she mentally retraced her steps, hoping she hadn't left evidence of her spontaneous and unplanned escape.

As usual, she'd been in the middle of a punishment. Locked in a room for two weeks—no food and little water—with another week of the same to look forward to. The punishment had been the result of trying, and failing, again, to refuse Darius' advances.

Captain Darius of the *Extarga*, a.k.a the Hell Ship, had become full of rage at her continued resistance and ordered her locked away until she could accept her lot...accept him. Something she would never do.

She could never give her heart, body, or soul to someone like Darius. He was heartless and brutal.

As she had crouched on the floor of her cell, a man entered. She'd seen him before. He'd tended to her many times. Each time, she attempted a conversation, with no reciprocation.

She couldn't fault him, though. Darius strove to keep her isolated on *Extarga*, hidden away from most of the crew. Those few who had come into her presence—to bring her food or a fresh change of clothes—were ordered not to speak with her, or be *disciplined*. None had risked themselves for her conversation. Not that she didn't continue to try.

“How is your day?” she would say to whoever had been sent to her room. It was a phrase she'd heard before, through stolen moments from the ship's surveillance. “What is your name?” she would ask, hopeful for a response.

When they ignored her, she would only continue as if the conversation were two sided instead of one, telling them anything that popped into her head: her thoughts of whatever room she was in at the time or how she missed the view of space. She hadn't been allowed to see it in decades.

She drew some satisfaction from the one-sided conversation, if only a little. It always meant something to her when they lingered slightly, as though they were listening.

But in that moment she hadn't been interested in conversation, eyeing the scraps of food the man had brought for her. Scraps not even fit for an

animal, but she'd take it. She was growing thin from hunger.

Though the man hadn't said a word, he had watched her as she ravaged the scraps. The first bite of food she'd eaten in a week and it had not been enough to fill her belly. She'd barely tasted it, which, by the way it had looked, hadn't been a bad thing.

Wiping her mouth, she had looked up at the man, surprised he was still there. There'd been something in his expression she had never seen before. Was it sorrow? Shame? Did he pity her? Probably. Who wouldn't?

She'd wondered what she must look like, unwashed in her tattered dress. Her feet were bare, her nails were dirty and bitten, and her hair hadn't been properly brushed for some time.

When the man turned to leave the room, he hadn't left as normal: by closing the door tight and double checking the lock. Instead, he opened the door wide and withdrew in a rush. Without even a backward glance, he had allowed the heavy door to fall closed from its own weight.

Analia didn't know what had compelled her to act in that moment, just that she had. Rushing forward, she inserted her fingers in the doorway, just before it shut her in. She stifled a scream when the heavy door came crashing down on her.

Grinding her teeth, she resisted the urge to cradle her hand and waited.

One heartbeat. Two. Three. Her breath was labored. The first rush of adrenaline entered her system, followed by the spark of an idea. Her heart began to race at the possibilities.

What do I do now?

Then she'd remembered that several merchant ships were scheduled to dock. Perhaps...if she were lucky. If she could only make it to the docking bay. If a ship was even there, it was possible she could escape *Extarga*.

That's a lot of ifs.

She thought of the consequences if she went through with this and failed. A stream of horrific images entered her mind. She would suffer for

days, weeks, maybe longer if she was caught. Never had she done anything so bold as to try to escape.

But if she didn't at least try, she knew she would regret it for the rest of her life, no matter the consequences. There may never be an opportunity like this again.

Hope flooded her, made her feel light. The idea of freedom, a better life, possibly being within her reach was a heady thought.

What if I do get free and it's worse out there?

The idea spread through her like a poison. If she did escape, and found herself on a merchant ship...what if the people on board were worse than Darius?

She pushed the thought from her mind. It couldn't be possible. Could it? Dark images swirled in her mind, picking at her resolve.

Or, what if they found out about her gift? Perhaps her unusual pointed ears were a clear sign of what she was, even if she didn't know.

Maybe under different circumstances she would have embraced her ability, but for so long she'd suffered because of it and only wished it gone. Unfortunately, as far as she knew, that was impossible. It was a part of her, through and through, blood to bone. And it was the reason Darius kept her as isolated as he did. To him, she was but an object. A piece of machinery at his disposal.

It could be that her gift was a normal trait of her people. If so, it was the only connection she had to them. She had no idea what she was or where she came from. No memory of her people. She'd been but a child when Darius had claimed her.

Analia knew what awaited her here on the Hell Ship—a lifetime of suffering until Darius siphoned every last drop of her will in his attempt to break her. Eventually he would succeed.

When she was sure the hallway was empty, she braved a peek. Then she prayed for the luck of the gods and eased the door shut till she heard

the soft click of the lock move into place. Any decision she might have made to turn back disintegrated in that moment.

She glided through the corridors, toward the docking bay. Her bare feet made little noise as she went. She knew this ship better than anyone. She knew it better than Darius himself.

When Darius hooked her up to the ship, Analia had the ability to tap into the ship's heavy surveillance system. It was as though the images from the cameras were displayed directly into her mind, and she could see everything all at once. As far as she could tell, it was the only real benefit of her gift.

Though it wasn't much of a tradeoff, considering the pain of being hooked up to the ship was nearly blinding. The sensation of her energy being drawn out of her body and into the ship's power storage system was agony. To take her mind off it, she watched the crew through the cameras, envying their freedom.

It was her only joy, but right now it was her greatest enemy.

Making her way to a small control panel, she went to work infiltrating the system. For once, her ability would benefit her.

As she hooked herself up to the ship, she felt the moment she became part of it, like one colossal machine working in unison.

Analia shook her head and frowned in disgust. She really was a piece of equipment.

Everything in the ship's database was her playground. Every piece of information, every secret, and every code belonged to her. If Darius ever found out about the extent of her ability, he would surely use her to spy on his crew. There were not many under Darius' command who spoke highly of him in private conversation.

With the ship at her command, she proceeded, first, to clear an easy path to the docking bay by unlocking any door that might be sealed, and checked to see if any crew members would be in her way. After ensuring a

straight path, she erased two solid weeks of recorded surveillance. Then she shut it down completely and locked the system, changing the codes before continuing toward the docking bay.

The system was only checked once every few months, and anything recorded was only viewed when there was a discrepancy. No one would think to check it until long after she'd gone. If they wanted in, they were going to have to hack the system in order to gain access. And because she *was* the system, she knew they would have a hell of a time of it.

Only once, as she carefully traversed the maze of passageways, did she come across trouble—a couple crew members, advancing toward her. She heard them before she saw them. They walked confident and loud, boots thudding on the hard shiny floor, ready to turn the corner that would put her in their line of sight.

Dread engulfed her, overtaking her senses. But after her panic-filled moment, she was able to calm her emotions, and dove for a door to her right.

The room was small and dark like a closet, but empty and unused. Her body had begun to tremble with worry, her hands shaking uncontrollably. Opening, closing, and rubbing them together, she tried to relieve the tremors.

The voices became loud, just outside the door. She froze. Her breathing stopped. Only when the voices and footsteps continued past did her body relax.

She was tired, so tired.

Those couple of weeks without food had greatly weakened her. And she had slept badly on that cold iron floor, sometimes only falling asleep when exhaustion overruled the chill in her bones.

She pushed into the now empty corridor and continued with caution. The hallways remained quiet.

The path she had hacked allowed doors to open at her approach. With each threshold, her anxiety was reborn. Each hallway was like a repetition of the first. There was nothing distinguishing, nothing but grey walls illuminated by dim overhead lights.

With her nerves grated, she had finally made it to the docking bay.

A merchant ship was indeed docked, both ships connected and open to each other. She'd almost cried out with a surge of an unfamiliar mixture of emotions.

Joy. Relief. Anticipation.

That is, until she'd spotted the guard blocking her path. A large, strong looking male, a bored scowl etched in his features. Spiky blond hair framed his face and a black short sleeved shirt revealed his muscular arms and chest. Black pants and a pair of black boots covered his lower half. He leaned against the wall of the ship, wearing an aura of danger. Like he could rip you apart with his bare hands while maintaining that look of boredom.

Luckily, he hadn't seen her. She was already halfway hidden behind large piles of cargo. The stack of boxes towered high enough to hide a body three times her size.

She had to hold her nose to contain a building sneeze as she caught a whiff of spices.

She didn't know how long she remained in her semi-hidden position, but the time dragged. Any minute now, the docking bay would be flooded with workers, sent to gather the goods. She could only wait and hope for an opportunity, the perfect moment when no one was watching so she could hide herself away on the merchant ship. She prayed for a distraction.

The docking bay was a huge room. The ceiling stretched high overhead, and the walls were covered in white. Three floors tiered around the great round chamber. Massive machines used for lifting heavy cargo loomed above her, bolted to the thick retaining walls.

No one was currently manning them.

Usually a slave or two was brought with each delivery, though she didn't see any this time. Darius liked to acquire things, people included. Although most of the crew were free, many were slaves, and of those, mostly women. And though they were treated just as poorly as Analia, they were rarely kept as isolated.

Each crew member, slave or not, had two things in common. First, they were all handpicked by Darius, selected for their great strength, knowledge, or beauty. He demanded only the best at his command. Second, they feared their leader.

When he wasn't punishing Analia for some perceived infraction, he often forced her to watch as someone else suffered. In order, she suspected, to frighten her into submission.

It worked.

She was once forced to witness a group being *disciplined*. One of the men had been condemned to death. The other three were ordered to take his life or die themselves.

Analia never learned what they did to deserve such a punishment. They were given no weapons to carry out the act. Horror-struck, she watched as they pounded at the condemned man with only hands and feet to save their own lives. If she didn't watch, if she'd closed her eyes, then she would be on the receiving end of her own punishment.

She shook the memory away. This was her first real attempt at escape. She'd thought of it many times before, dreamt of what it would be like to be in possession of her own life. To do what she wanted when she wanted.

Oh, how she craved freedom.

To think, act, and speak with no fear of consequence. No one forcing her to use her ability until her body, drained of almost all its essence, gave out in exhaustion. No man to encroach on her body, when she hadn't the energy to fight him off.

She shook her head.

Focus.

She peeked from behind her hiding spot. The guard was still there, blocking her escape. He hadn't moved from his position since she last chanced a look. She'd never seen the man before, which meant he was a member of the merchant ship and was standing there for the sole purpose of keeping people, such as her, from trespassing.

Her plan had been simple, well...in theory. She planned to sneak onto the merchant ship, hide until it next docked, and then sneak off again, disappearing forever from Darius' reach. Easy, right?

She just needed a little more luck, just a little to get her on that ship, one step closer to freedom. She deserved it, dammit! How much more should she be made to suffer? How much more could she take?

“Calic!” a male voice shouted.

Analia jumped at the sound. She peeked to see the guard's attention diverted to something inside the other ship.

“What?” the blond guard snapped.

“The last load is stuck!” the other voice yelled. “We can't get it through the doorway! It won't fit!”

“It helps if you're smarter than the door,” the blond guard muttered before yelling back, “We got it in there, didn't we?” He sighed before disappearing inside.

Her heart beat heavily in her chest. She waited a few seconds, expecting him to return quickly. When he didn't, she sucked in a breath and moved forward, hesitant at first, and then she dashed for the opening. She could hear nothing but the rush of blood in her ears and the quick thud of her wild heart.

Closer. Closer.

Her breath caught when she crossed the threshold onto the other ship. No sign of the blond guard.

She took in her new surroundings. The room was significantly smaller than the docking bay at her back, suggesting that the merchant ship as a whole was a fraction the size of *Extarga*.

There were two doorways, one to her front and one to her right. As voices came from the latter, she sprang for the opening to her front.

Spying ahead first, she moved through the door and into a long hallway. The air was warmer here, and a cushiony tan carpet tickled her feet. She was shocked by the sight of color on the walls, a mocha brown warmed by the touch of soft overhead light.

Ignoring the exhaustion and hunger that loomed over her, she moved quickly, seeing no promise of shelter. She was exposed, and if anyone spotted her now, all would be lost.

After passing through a few empty halls, guided by instinct alone, she spotted an open doorway. Beyond it, a sight she hadn't seen for a very long time.

Disbelieving, she was drawn forward.

The room was round with computer consoles wrapped around the edge. A center console near the back wall to her left stood alone. A massive window blanketed more than half the room and revealed a sight she'd been callously deprived of by Darius, a sight she had longed for.

Awe overpowered her as she gazed through the window.

Space!

Black. Deep. Vast. Speckled with pinpricks of light—endless possibilities masked in darkness. The power of it held her where she stood. Her tightly wound emotions nearly exploded at the beauty before her.

Only one thing was able to tear her eyes away and bring her back to reality.

She was not alone.

A young dark haired male sat facing the encompassing window with his back to her. His attention was on his computer console, clicking away,

oblivious to her.

“Cargo's unloaded!” a distant voice came from behind. Someone was coming toward her. “The captain wants the ship ready to go as soon as he returns!”

Her stomach tightened, and a bead of sweat ran down her spine. Slowly, she edged away from the door and crouched behind the main console, the only place where she could hide. Unfortunately, she was but partially hidden. The approaching male might not see her upon entering, but if the other man sitting at his station turned, he would spot her instantly. She watched him intensely, holding her breath.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

After glancing around once more, a frightening realization hit her, and her throat went dry. She swallowed hard.

The control room!

The heart of the ship! A room that will soon be filled with bodies ready to take their stations. And the console she was crouched behind, considering its location in the room, must belong to the captain!

In a panic, she searched for another escape. There were no other doors. There was nothing else to hide behind, in, or under.

The station she crouched behind was only a few feet from the back wall, which was drawing her attention. She got the feeling that something was there. Something she was not seeing.

Then she caught it from the corner of her eye—a small latch near the floor, not too far out of reach.

The male entered the room. “Did you hear me?” he said to the other man. “Call the crew back to their stations. We'll be departing as soon as the captain returns.”

“Yeah, I heard you.”

Analía scooted out of view as the male advanced into the room to attend an unoccupied console next to his colleague, leaving his back to her.

She reached out and gently lifted the latch. There was a soft click. Her breath caught at the sound. Glancing at both men, she was relieved they didn't seem to have noticed the noise.

She pulled gently, half expecting the tiny door to squeak from lack of use, but it silently revealed a small opening just big enough for her to fit through.

Shuffling through the space, she pulled the door closed behind her.

Click.

She almost growled at the sound, which seemed louder this time.

After a moment of bloodcurdling stillness, she released the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding and surveyed her new surroundings. It was a small, cramped space, seemingly for maintenance purposes. Tubes of varying thickness ran along one wall, lit by a dim line of lights. The space was barely large enough for her to lie down with her knees bent, which, at the moment, was extremely tempting. Every muscle in her body was pulled taut. Her heart still pounded with adrenaline.

Making herself as comfortable as possible, she fought against an exhaustion that threatened to drag her into oblivion. Passing out right now would not be good. Once she felt safe, she'd relent, but not yet. The ships had yet to detach and everything could still go wrong.

She tried to listen to what was happening outside her tiny enclosure. Nothing, it seemed. She pictured the two men clicking away at their computers.

Light and dark spots began to star her vision, indicating that she was losing her battle against the overwhelming fatigue pressing down on her. She had succumbed to exhaustion enough times to know that she was lost. Still, she strained to stay awake, rubbing her eyes to reinvigorate them in a near useless attempt to keep them from closing again. Her brain pounded with the need to shut down. Only now did her heart begin to slow. Breathing was becoming easier. Body relaxing, her head lulled.

Stay awake.

Vision blurred.

The last thing she heard was the voice of a man, someone who had just entered the control room. She was unable to make out what was said, but the deep masculine timbre seemed to ease her in some way. She allowed it to roll over her, a vibrating energy that wrapped her in a cloak of security.

Or was that just exhaustion making her delusional?

Still, she couldn't deny the energy she felt from him, even from within her enclosure.

His rumbling voice boomed again. There was no making sense of his words in her tired mind.

She closed her eyes as her brain fell into blackness.

CHAPTER 2



Sebastian Uthair sat in the all-too-familiar spot, across from Darius in a chair similar to his, but slightly lower to the ground. Darius was half hidden behind the large wooden desk, as usual. Wood was difficult to acquire in space, vastly expensive in its raw form. Fully crafted, it sold for astronomical prices, and was generally only acquired as a means to display status or wealth.

Wealth Darius had, which was made obvious by the overabundance of wood furnishings and expensive tapestries decorating his office. But status in space was meaningless. Space was a hostile environment that required a sharp and cunning mind over prestige any day. That, and a shit load of weapons.

Most of the items in Darius' office were displayed to exude a sense of upper-class and distinction, objects placed meticulously to build a sense of importance. Sebastian saw it for what it was: a facade of an egotistical man. This man was no more important than a leaf on the wind. As a merchant, Sebastian had to deal with these all-too-self-important types constantly.

Darius dressed—same as he decorated his office—with the purpose of seeming more important than he was. His suit, expertly tailored, was made

from the finest fabrics. Shoes buffed to a perfect shine. And his coffee-colored hair was molded neatly, framing his face.

He sipped his cup of steaming liquid while, in turn, scrutinizing Sebastian. Sebastian's clothes were simple. His style was more wear-whatever-you-grab and less preconceived, although today he put a little more thought into his dress. A pair of black pants—riddled with pockets, buckles, and secret places to hide his weapons—a pair of thick black boots, scuffed with overuse, and a dark coat lined with a light-grey faux fur over a simple white shirt. Around his neck he wore two heavy silver chains, which could double as weapons if needed. His short black hair was purposefully messed, allowing his horns to peek out. He too knew how to put on a show. His appearance projected danger and reinforced the common knowledge that one did not want to piss off a demon, especially this one.

Darius sat silently, giving off his usual air of superiority. Sebastian matched him with a quiet reserve, knowing what was about to come.

Negotiation time.

“I'll give you half the agreed price,” Darius finally declared in a tone meant to end the conversation there. He put down his mug and picked up his pen, readying to draw up the new contract.

Two items missing from the load and the bastard thinks he should get half off!

It was rare for any merchant to feasibly acquire everything on a client's list. Especially one of Darius' lists. Most captains understood this, which was why many merchants catered to the same clients. It was the natural ebb and flow of space commerce.

Yet, so was bargaining.

Stifling his annoyance, Sebastian replied, “That would not even cover my costs.” His voice was calm, a slight lift at the corners of his lips, his face a mask of arrogance.

“A few of the items I requested are missing from the load. I cannot pay the full amount we agreed upon. If I did that, every one of my merchants would bring me only half of my order and demand full price.” Darius tsked.

“There are only two items I was unable to acquire and those items are damn near impossible for anyone to get. I would have to risk my life or the lives of my crew, and you are not paying me enough for that.”

“I disagree.” A knowing smile played across his lips. “A few short weeks ago, a competitor of yours, Kierok, I believe was his name, was able to bring me one of those items and charged me less than you quoted.” A steely pause. “Perhaps I should do more business with *him*.”

Sebastian knew Kierok, a rival merchant and a heartless creature. He also knew that Darius was waiting for some kind of outburst at the prospect of losing him as a customer. He probably expected Sebastian to crumble at his words and beg for whatever pay he was willing to offer.

But Sebastian could not care less if he and Darius did business. There was something abhorrent about the man. Sebastian sensed he needed to tread cautiously around him and always kept his guard up, as though he were a snake in the grass waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

“Kierok doesn't give two shits about his own crew and callously risked their lives to procure your goods. I don't work that way.”

Darius studied him for a moment, frown in place. “Kierok could provide me with all the same services as you,” he pushed.

Sebastian only smiled, never taking his eyes from the man in front of him. “If that's how you feel, I will have my men pack up the cargo and we'll be on our way.”

Darius tried and failed to hide a sneer before saying, “Unfortunately, I cannot wait for Kierok. But I will not pay full price for partial delivery.” He slammed his hand down on his desk to emphasize his point.

Sebastian shrugged, unconcerned. “I will offer to take three percent off the agreed price.”

Darius, visibly agitated, leaned back in his chair. “Make it thirty percent.”

“Eight percent.”

Through clenched teeth, Darius replied, “I will accept no less than twenty percent off.”

Sebastian pretended to weigh his options. “Then I am sorry. I’ll have to decline your offer.” He stood, indicating the end of negotiations and his patience. He had many other contacts that would pay adequately for his supplies.

He held out his hand in a businesslike gesture, resolution covering his features.

Darius eyed his outstretched arm with disgust. “Fifteen percent,” he growled.

Offering him a fake look of indecision, Sebastian pulled his hand back and contemplated the new offer. If he had more time, he would have argued further, but he needed to be on his way. “I think I can deal with that.” He didn’t offer his hand again, and neither did Darius.

Darius bent to unlock a drawer low on his desk, lifting from it a small black box. He reached in and counted, then recounted the correct number of chips before tossing them on the desk in front of Sebastian.

Sebastian gathered the payment, bid Darius farewell, and proceeded back to his ship, passing a handful of bodyguards on his way out. He couldn’t wait to get back. The next stop promised to be a big job, one of their biggest. He was about to negotiate a contract with the Serakians—an ancient and wise race known for their peaceful and gentle nature. When riled, however, they proved to be exceptionally fierce.

To anyone who chose to accept, the Serakians were offering a generous sum to transport a curiously small amount of cargo. Sebastian had

received the notice just after he'd negotiated the contract with Darius. Now that the contract was fulfilled, he and his crew would head straight to the Serakian rendezvous point. Luckily, it wasn't too far from their current location, and should only take a week or so of travel.

The commission from this coming job could feed his crew for months, maybe a year. Sebastian was protective of his crew. He was their leader, their captain. Every action he took affected them as much as it did him. Many in his crew were next to family. Of the more than two hundred crew members more than half were loyal friends, but only two were blood relations—his sister Sonya and his brother Calic.

With a sense of satisfaction, Sebastian crossed onto his ship. Calic grunted a nod at him. Calic was his second in command. He was a tough leader, and an even tougher adversary. When they would spar, Calic held nothing back, as if he possessed a deep rage clawing for release. He demonstrated a ferocity Sebastian had never seen the likes of.

Sebastian had the same rage bubbling inside him. However, he was able to hone it differently by focusing on the survival of his crew and on each commission. He understood where the malice came from, though. They'd both been betrayed by women they loved. Calic's beloved mate and their own mother had turned their backs on them at the worst possible moment.

As a result, both Calic and Sebastian kept their women at a distance, using them for what was necessary and discarding them the moment after. The only difference between the two was that Sebastian never slept with anyone aboard *Marada*, though more than enough women lived on the ship. A few had even propositioned him. It was a strict policy he tried to enforce with everyone, including Calic. But, like many, Calic refused to submit.

“Is everything unloaded?”

Calic nodded. “Yeah, how did it go with Darius?”

“He got fifteen percent off.”

“Huh. Not too bad.” Calic pressed a series of buttons on the control pad and the docking hatch began to close. Metal screeched against metal as the heavy locks moved into place and a faint hiss issued as the door sealed shut.

They made their way to the bridge, where Sebastian claimed his position at the center console. As ordered, the crew was at their posts with the ship ready for departure.

An unfamiliar fragrance filled the space around him. He sniffed the air. It was feminine. “Cale! Have you had a female in here?”

Calic laughed carelessly. Conceit dripped from his words, “Depends on when you're referring to.”

“Keep them out of the control room,” Sebastian scolded. If Calic was going to consistently break the rules, there were plenty of more appropriate places to do it.

So help me, if he had her on my console!

Calic just shrugged in response.

Not soon enough, the ship roared to life. Sebastian was eager to get to the rendezvous and accept the contract before anyone else beat him to it. His ship was fast, but they'd been delayed due to the contract with Darius. In hindsight, he regretted accepting that commission, but the deal had already been struck, and Sebastian always fulfilled his contracts. He just hoped the delay hadn't cost him.

He wasn't too worried, however. The Serakians stipulations were extreme, to say the least. Even though the pay was great, he doubted many would be eager to take on the job.

His crew barked out their actions as the thrusters fired, surging *Marada* forward. With the course set, Sebastian eased into his seat. The crew seemed to relax along with him.

For a long while, he watched the stars as they twinkled like trapped firebugs, thinking over his checklist of supplies. They'd made several stops before meeting with Darius, stocking up in preparation for the lengthy trip ahead. He wasn't certain how long their journey would take, just that it would be a great distance. That could mean weeks or months or, gods forbid, years. He wanted to make sure they were fully prepared for whatever was required.

Even though they were currently better stocked than they'd ever been, he would still barter for more supplies from the Serakians. Being over prepared would set him more at ease with what he was about to put his crew through.

Analia woke. The unfamiliar rumbling of the ship reverberated through her bones. How long had she been asleep? Obviously long enough that the scraps of food she'd last eaten were all but consumed by her body. The ache in her stomach punished her for it. She was weak. Struggling to even move her arms, she wrapped one around herself for added comfort. Icy chills racked her. Shivering, she stifled a groan, remembering where she was—a strange ship and an unknown crew. Her heart jumped as realization hit her.

I'm free.

It was done. She was no longer on the Hell Ship. Grinning stupidly, tears began to stream down her temples. She had to keep herself from laughing out loud. A weight seemed to have lifted from her chest, making her feel lighter.

Freedom! her mind repeated the word.

Her joy was cut short, feeling herself growing weaker by the minute. Her already cramped space seemed to grow smaller with each breath. Shifting her body in an attempt at a more comfortable position, she rested her head on the crook of her arm and stared at the blank grey wall. Once more, her stomach growled. She clutched her abdomen in an attempt to silence it.

She could only hope the crew decided to dock soon so she could escape *this* ship and disappear into a faceless crowd. Her pulse jerked at the prospect. Being away from *Extarga* was nearly intoxicating. But she knew, even though she'd escaped, she wasn't safe yet.

Getting on this craft had been easier than she could have imagined. Surely it would be just as easy getting off, right?

At the thought of Darius, she grinned anew, imagining the look on his face when he found that his precious Analia was missing.

Did I just giggle?

It was possible she was becoming delusional from thirst and hunger.

Just once, she would have loved to have seen the look of defeat on his face. To revel in the fact that she alone had bested him. Would he be engulfed in rage? Would he regret his treatment of her? Doubtful. Or would he set out straightaway to find her. Fear prickled her, and she lost her good mood. That's exactly what he would do.

They had to pull into a port soon. This was a merchant ship, after all.

Thinking back, she wondered if she'd adequately covered her tracks. Would the search take long enough for her to carry out her plan, or was he already on his way to claim her once more? She bit her lip with worry. There had been other ships to come and go. Hopefully he would seek them out first.

She found it was becoming harder to keep her eyes open. Voices trailed through the small grated door. To stay awake, she tried to concentrate on

the conversation outside. It must be the captain's voice that she heard the loudest. His words were muffled. She scooted closer to the door to listen. Someone was saying something about...wards?

"Once the wards are in place, you may begin your long journey." This came from a commanding voice...a female voice.

"My men are gathering the supplies you promised." *The captain?* "They should be back shortly." He paused. "Is this it? Is this all we are to transport?"

"That is all that was requested of us. It is enough," the woman's voice proclaimed. "The contents of this box are without price. Irreplaceable. This is a very important task you undertake. Ethanule's reasoning for choosing *you* above all others is...beyond me. Know this...if this box does not reach its intended destination, you will face the wrath of my entire race, as well as Ethanule's."

Analía's curiosity was piqued.

"I assure you, Lady Hieskita, we are excellent at what we do. There is no doubt...."

"You understand your journey will take you through the warring territories. Have you no reservations about that?" the woman interrupted.

"There are ways around those zones. It would only make the trip a little longer to avoid them. And, if we must, we have maneuvered those territories many times before." The captain's reply sounded as though he was smiling at the challenge.

"You fully understand the wards then? What will happen if they're breached?"

"Yes." He tried to conceal the exasperation in his tone. "If anyone leaves or enters the ship before the package is delivered, the contract is annulled...and we are still required to deliver the package, without pay," he said robotically, emphasizing the last words. "Or risk war from both you and Ethanule."

Lady Hieskita humphed and said nothing more.

Analia laid back, alarmed by their conversation. *Wards? Long journey? No one on or off the ship!* She had to make her move now. But how?

Her mind felt dull, but she could tell there were many people out there. Too many for a clean escape, especially with her slow reflexes and weary body. More than that, she had no idea where they were. How far had they come? She realized now that she had no experience with new places, new cultures. She'd have no idea how to act, who to trust, how not to get herself killed.

Maybe she could wait it out. How lengthy could this trip be?

Thanks to Darius' favorite punishment, she found she was able to go without food for longer and longer periods of time. But how much more could she endure? Furthermore, how much time had already past? She was so hungry. She didn't think she could hold out much longer.

By the sound of soft approaching voices, the decision to stay and wait it out was made for her. The captain took one last moment to reassure the Lady Hieskita.

"I pray for your safe journey," she replied. Then the room went silent until she began chanting. Ancient sounding words that dripped with power and energy filled the empty space around her. Energy slithered and writhed around her. It clung to her—tiny tendrils clamoring, seeking a way inside.

At first Analia resisted, using her own energy to push against it, but it pushed harder. The power didn't feel malicious, just strong. She relaxed a little, allowing the strange current to do as it wished. It softened, and then flittered through her like a warm embrace before dissipating.

When the woman's chanting died out, she said simply, "The wards are in place."

The captain said his goodbyes and thanked the woman. After a short while, a great sound rumbled.

The ship was on the move once again.

Analía's body felt colder and weaker than before. Her initial resistance to the odd energy had cost her. Breath coming in short spurts, she curled into a ball in an attempt to warm her shuddering body. When that didn't work, she allowed the weariness to overcome and she welcomed the cradling arms of unconsciousness.

Sebastian was damn curious about that box. Never had a job been racked with such complications. His crew was used to docking at a space city every so often for supplies, equipment, and entertainment. They'd never gone more than a few weeks without stopping for some reason or another.

They were stocked to the brim for this trip, but it would be a trial for the crew, being on board for so long. After receiving their intended destination from Lady Hieskita, he figured the journey could take a little more than seven months, maybe ten. Once the job was completed, he would make sure they all had some much-needed time away from *Marada*. Maybe find a cozy planet, brimming with fresh women.

The wards spooked him, knowing they were there yet unseen, like a parasite attached to his beloved ship. In the past, he had refused many jobs due to such restrictions in the contract. This one, however, promised to pay the equivalent of more than ten commissions combined, nearly double what he'd first thought it would be. He couldn't refuse.

To his utter shock, Ethanule had personally requested *Marada* for this mission. Why?

Ethanule was the leader of a faction of pirates. They'd done one job for him in the past; a small commission at that. There had been nothing

challenging about it, nothing that should prove any real worth as a merchant or a cargo ship. Furthermore, Sebastian hadn't hid his distaste for pirates. His family openly disliked them, since their father had been brutally murdered by their kind.

But sometimes, a job is just a job.

His thoughts drifted back to the parcel. Why would Ethanule ask for him? And what could be so important that came in such a small package? That which could invoke the wrath of an entire race? This commission could either be a great achievement or his utter destruction.

Calic eyed him warily, possibly thinking the same thing. "Our course has been downloaded into the ship's navigation system, Captain."

"Good. Let's get going then. Cale, take command."

Calic nodded and assumed control of the bridge.

Sebastian left, taking the stairway outside that lead to his quarters, just above the control room. A domed window, covering half the room, ceiling to floor, revealed a vast spacescape. Unlike the one in the control room, this one did not double as an oversized communication screen, just provided a great view.

Marada itself was complete with luxuries, unusually so for a typical merchant ship. The previous owner—an extravagant and apparently rich individual—had adorned the ship with every comfort one could think of. There was a spa room with an oversized pool, and a built-in pub separate from the galley and salon. There was even a large room dressed with soil, live plants, and an artificial stream of re-circulating water. The place reminded many on board of their home planets.

But what was most amazing was *Marada's* water recycling and regeneration system, unusual for such a large ship. Where many ships used the more economical powder enzyme shower systems, *Marada* used real water. The system allowed for an abundant use of water—one of the scarcest commodities in deep space—over long periods of time. Water

could be used and recycled many times over without contaminants entering the system. The only drawback was, every few decades, fresh water needed to be added to the system, siphoned from a planet that was overflowing with it.

Everything about the ship was made to provide a sense of comfort.

Even though it was constructed like a cruise ship, great attention had been paid to the internal workings as well. It was state of the art in defense and weaponry, as well as navigation. The ship came complete with an extensive database of galaxies, solar systems, stars, planets, different races, and extremely detailed information about places far out of reach.

Yes, the day he, Cale, and Sonya had stolen it, they found that they had acquired a good ship indeed. It had been five hundred years ago, the day of the betrayal, and the beginning of the war that ultimately destroyed their home planet. It was a war between his people and the warmongers who called themselves Kayadon.

The Kayadon had come in fast, without warning. Only a select few had known what was coming, and many of those who knew chose to betray their people and their planet in favor of the infidels. People like their mother and Calic's mate. He thought of them now with venom in his heart. *Cowards.*

Shortly after the war had begun, he and his brother had received word that the fighting was nearing their village. After a quick meeting among the elders, all able men were called together. The brothers hadn't hesitated to join the fray, to protect their homes and families.

Sonya had spent hours begging to come along. She wanted to fight as badly as they had. Sebastian, being the eldest male in the family, had refused.

Not that she couldn't take care of herself. She had always been a strong fighter, trained by Sebastian himself. Her speed was incredible. She was faster than anyone in the village, including Cale. But he wouldn't let her

fight because he couldn't stand the thought of losing her in battle. He had always been fiercely protective of her. Both he and Calic still were.

Readying their battle gear, Cale and Sebastian were unaware of the danger in their own home. The two women had approached as if to kiss them goodbye, but, instead, injected them with a poison that would render them weak and, therefore, useless in a fight. The poison had taken affect nearly instantaneously. Both men—disoriented, muscles slack and weak—howled in rage. Sonya too screamed her horror. “What have you done!” he recalled her saying over and over again.

“The Kayadon have come to lead us,” their mother had ranted in a radical tone he'd never before heard her use. For the first time, he noticed the glossy glazed look in her eyes as she fanatically spouted her support for the invaders.

Seething with anger, and a newfound hatred, they had left the two women behind as they made their escape. The fighting was close, and they could not defend themselves. Survival instincts had taken over.

They thought to hide out in a cave or the woods till the poison passed through their systems and they once again regained their strength.

That's when they came upon *Marada*, belonging to a solitary Kayadon nobleman waiting to stake a claim on their home planet. The interloper had landed his ship far enough away from the war zone to not get involved, but close enough that he could join in the victory when it was over. The bastard never lived to see the end of the war.

After Sonya slit the man's throat, Sebastian and Calic readied the ship for takeoff. There was a short period of trial and error with the controls. Their kind had always been swift learners.

The Kayadon had quickly won the war. Their weapons had been far more advanced at the time, and they had the element of surprise. Soon after their victory, they had scorched the demon planet to the point of

being uninhabitable. The Kayadon had taken what they could and enslaved many of Sebastian's people.

Sebastian shook away the memories of that terrible day. He hated that after hundreds of years later it still haunted him. He could see the anger festering within his brother too, and it had only grown over these long years. He feared that one day his brother could be lost to the rage forever.

He showered quickly and dressed before setting out again.

At present, Sonya was in charge of *Marada's* pub. She seemed happy there. But, every once in awhile, he would see in her eyes the same look that he sometimes caught in his own, or in Cale's—a deep mourning for the loss of the home they would never know again.

Sebastian entered the pub—Sonya liked to call it The Demon's Punchbowl—and took a seat. Sonya spotted him and waved while attending Bertok, a trusted crew member who had been with them for years. Bertok shifted in his seat to nod a silent greeting at Sebastian, then turned back to his drink.

“Hey!” Sonya smiled, sashaying toward Sebastian. Her thin tail—a trait of female demons—swung side to side as she walked, making her look more seductive.

Sebastian ground his teeth at that. He suspected she did that intentionally.

Fortunately, the men on the ship were smart enough to stay away from her. They understood that he or Cale would kill anyone who dare hurt her. He also knew that Sonya resented their over protectiveness.

Sebastian smiled as she approached. “Hi, Sunny.” To his amusement, she scowled at the nickname.

“What can I do for you, *Bastard*?”

He smiled wider. “I'll take some of that new stuff you got in.”

“Ah, the raging inferno. It's pretty strong, even for us demons.”

“Good. The stronger, the better.”

Sonya poured him a generous glass and then prepared a shot for herself. She lifted the tiny glass expectantly. It was a ritual that they'd brought with them from their home planet. Whenever an unfamiliar drink was imbibed, it was always done in the company of a friend or loved one. The practice arose following a string of serial murders through the use of poison mixed with foreign alcohols.

Turned out an insane member of the demon community was going around killing off his friends. Imported alcohols had been used because a demon could easily detect poison through taste in familiar drinks, but with previously unconsumed substances that talent was nullified. Now, the simple ritual was a sign of trust and friendship.

Sebastian raised his glass.

While he sipped his drink, Sonya downed hers in one gulp, slamming her glass on the counter. "Good stuff," she declared.

Sebastian nodded his agreement.

"So," she continued. "We're stuck on the ship for some time, I hear." Again Sebastian nodded. "Well, it'll be good for business." Perking up, she poured herself another shot.

Even though Sonya was much more lenient with her pricing than the larger pubs in the space cities, whenever they docked, she always lost her clientele to the more lavish entertainment the cities provided.

She had made a profitable business out of her pub, wisely saving for her own future. Not that she was leaving her boys anytime soon.

Rather than use the ship's funds, she used pub profits to purchase whatever supplies she required, leaving herself independent of her brothers. That seemed to be important to her.

She also insisted on paying rent for her space. Sebastian had refused, but Sonya was persistent, giving him ten percent of her earnings each month. He saved everything she gave him, planning to give it all back to her one day—which, if he knew Sonya, would surely piss her off.

Sebastian chuckled out loud at that. When Sonya gave him a questioning look, he just shook his head and went back to his drink.

“So what's the load this time?” she asked.

“Don't know. Something very small. Too small for the pay if you ask me. But the package is sealed and the contract is void if we take even a peek.”

“Hey, sometimes the best things come in small packages. Just look at me.” She did her best I'm-just-a-cute-little-demon impression, which always made him laugh. For a demon, Sonya was on the small side. So was Sebastian, for that matter, though he still towered over her.

“You're right,” he said, ruffling her long, black-as-pitch hair.

She bellowed out a curse in Demonish, their native language, while swatting his hand away. Vainly, she rushed to fix the disheveled mess. Her violet eyes blazed with irritation, and a little amusement.

Sebastian continued to sip his drink reflectively, as Sonya went about her business, refilling glasses and seeing to anyone who entered.

He hoped the decision he had made to accept this commission was the right one. Sonya's words repeated in his mind. Whether the package was large or small, it was significant to someone. Significant to a lot of someones, it seemed. He couldn't help but wonder why they would trust *him* with it?

Finishing the last of his drink, Sebastian waved his goodbye to Sonya. Calic would be in charge for the next few hours so he had some time to kill before he took command again. In the gym, he worked out some of his pent-up energy. A few hours later, he took a dip in the pool. Most days, he hated his downtime. He always felt he should be doing something. After the pool, he was relaxed and headed to his quarters for some rest before it came time to relieve Cale.

CHAPTER 3



Nearly a full week had passed and all was calm.

Sebastian had been working his crew hard. Round the clock detail. Each day brought them closer to their goal.

No one complained. Everyone seemed as eager as he to get this job over with. Maybe they sensed what he did. There was something different about this commission. It was taken more seriously by everyone. Even the most careless of the crew were noticeably working harder.

Sebastian was at his command center, checking the status of their progress. For the last week, *Marada's* engines had been churning at nearly constant full speed. It wasn't fast enough. He had hoped to be farther along than this.

Sighing, he settled into his chair, watching the vision of space at his front. It was stoic, calm, and never ending—deadly, if you weren't careful.

He imagined how different his life would be if he still lived on his home planet. If the war hadn't destroyed it, and if he'd never been deceived by those closest to him. He would have found a woman, he supposed, made a family. He would have built them an adequate home on his ancestors' land, and he would have strove every day to keep it up. Life would have been...boring.

As it was, he loved his adventurous existence, leading his crew and meeting all the strange races of the universe. Learning and mastering all the different languages and cultures. It gave him a purpose.

A faint groan jarred him from his thoughts, barely audible against the steady rumble of the ship, but distinct. Sebastian looked around. No one else seemed to have heard it.

Another moan, this one even quieter...anguished. His brows drew together. He had definitely heard something. He sniffed, again noticing something different in the air. Had been for a while, but he hadn't thought much of it.

He stood, concentrating on the source, opening his ears to the smallest noise. All he heard was the hum of the ship. But the sound had been very close. He thought it had come from behind, but the only thing back there was the bulkhead and a small maintenance compartment.

He approached the wall and stood silent. A rasping sound came from the other side. He bent down to open the door to the small compartment and staggered back in shock as a pair of tiny bare feet came into view.

"Who's this?" he bellowed, his voice a mix of threat and confusion. His horns heated as his body reacted to the flood of demon rage.

The owner of the wee feet made no move.

Sebastian bent closer, cautiously placing his hand on a thin ankle. Still no movement. He began to pull until a feminine body emerged from the small space.

The first thing he noticed was how thin and frail she looked, as though she would break with a light squeeze. She was marked with dirt from head to toe. A dingy, piece of cloth clung to her like a second skin, barely covering her.

He shifted his gaze to her face. Her skin was pale, but flawless. She had pouty lips, full and a tempting shade of pink. Blond, curling locks draped over her bare shoulders.

The female shivered.

“Who are you?” he ground out, finally pulling himself from his stupor. He realized he was holding her upper body in his arms. When had he reached for her?

At his booming voice, her eyes flew open. If Sebastian wasn't already kneeling on the ground, he would have fallen to his knees. He was instantly lost. The ship fell away and there was only her. The blue of her eyes was indescribable. So light they unabashedly pulled him in. No color imaginable compared. Her gaze turned pleading. For what? He didn't know. But in that moment he would have given it to her.

What was wrong with him?

Too soon, the color dulled and her head lolled before she slipped into unconsciousness. Sebastian, alarmed more than he should have been, felt for a pulse.

Faint, but still there.

The natural sounds of the ship slammed into him, as his surroundings came back into focus. Some of the crew had already gathered around, apparently repeating questions he hadn't heard them ask. They looked at him expectantly and at her with curiosity.

Lifting her off the ground, Sebastian took note of her weightlessness.

“Back to your posts!” he ordered, and then carried her out of the room without another word.

The crew must have been as shocked as he was to find this tiny creature, because none of them moved at his command. He didn't care. His only focus was getting her to the doctor. So he could find out how she was able to get onto his ship, not so he could see the vivid color of her eyes again.

Racing down the hall, he hardly noticed people stopping to stare at the strange beauty in his arms. The elevator made him impatient, moving slower than he remembered. He should get someone to look at it. Finally,

he reached the deck that housed sickbay. A few more passageways, and he was there. The doors parted for him, and he carefully laid her on one of the cots.

From a desk in the corner of the room, Dr. Oshwald looked up. He was a thin, lengthy man from one of the short-lived races.

It seemed to take the doctor a moment to comprehend the sudden disturbance before he rushed to Sebastian's side surveying the situation. His jaw dropped.

“Where...? Who is...?” He studied her as Sebastian had, prickling his ire.

In a pointed voice, Sebastian replied, “I don't know who she is. I just found her hiding in a maintenance compartment. She looks on the brink of death.”

Dr. Oshwald went to work with a skillful determination, while Sebastian leaned against the wall, arms crossed, and watched.

The doctor came from a race of healers, their unique gifts worked on most, but not all. Sebastian had no knowledge of the mechanics behind the doctor's invaluable gift. He'd asked him about it once and the doctor had told him that it was like looking inside the body with his mind's eye. Oshwald could search out the problem and then fix it as needed.

That's what he was doing now, searching through the female's body, all the while intermediately checking her vitals in stony silence. Sebastian made his impatience known, and the doctor finally began his healing touch, placing a hand near her heart and the other at the crown of her head.

He stayed like that for a lengthy time. The whole while, she didn't stir, didn't make a sound. The breathing movements of her chest were light and barely noticeable.

A sheen of sweat began to glisten on the doctor's forehead. Finally, he removed his hands and slumped in his chair with obvious exhaustion. With effort, he wiped his forehead before he spoke. “She will live.” The words

were heavy. “If she'd been brought to me any later, there would have been nothing I could have done for her.” Again he paused to catch his breath. “Forgive me. She took much of my energy.”

Sebastian waited patiently for him to continue at his own pace.

“I've healed her body, but she has been without nourishment for a long time it seems.”

“Are you saying she was in there starving to death?”

The doctor nodded.

“How long?”

“I couldn't say for sure. So many different races, so many different dietary needs. We won't know until she wakes and can answer for herself.”

Sebastian knew that many races could survive long periods without food. A demon could go three or more months without nourishment. You would have yourself an irritable demon, but he would be alive. If this creature was anything like a demon, she could have been hiding on his ship for months.

As the doctor continued his business, fury began to rise in Sebastian. Before, irrationally, he had felt compassion for her. Now he had regained his senses and was livid at her trespass. How dare she think to steal herself onto his ship? Then a thought burned through him, settling deep in his gut.

What of the wards?

Analia fell in and out of blurred consciousness. She had waited too long and had run out of time. Her body was giving up. She knew she'd had only two choices ahead of her. Make her presence known within the tiny

compartment, or resign herself to death. At least it was *her* choice to make and, though she was dying, she basked in that thought. No matter what she chose, her last action was that of a free woman.

Back inside the cramped box, she had felt herself trying to leave her body. But she'd fought it. Why? Death would have been so much easier. But then suddenly, there came a warmth around her ankle, and then strong arms around her torso. A voice had called her from the darkness. She sensed the presence of others, but strangely she didn't feel threatened.

I must finally be dead.

As she'd opened her eyes, she saw the most beautiful male she could have ever envisioned. He had the blackest hair and a contrasting golden stare that shimmered with some kind of emotion she was not familiar with.

His features were exquisite, and he was so warm pressed against her freezing skin. She'd wanted to curl up and stay in his arms forever, but her body had been too exhausted to move. As he'd carried her away, she thought he must be a being of the afterlife, come to guide her through death's doors. Her body still hurt with a lingering grasp of life, but that would soon be gone.

When the man began to fade, she begged with everything she had left for him to stay with her. But he was soon gone, a dark abyss taking his place.

Fuzzily, she awoke, not knowing how much time had passed. Awareness came to her slowly as her mind brushed away the thick haze. She was no

longer curled in a ball on the cold hard ground. Keeping her eyes closed, she accessed her other senses to evaluate her situation.

Her chest hurt, and her limbs were heavy and unresponsive. She was lying on something that was soft but firm. A musky fragrance lingered nearby. Cautiously, she peeked from underneath her lashes.

The beautiful being that she had thought would guide her through the portals of death loomed over her. No longer were his eyes warm, but an immense coldness covered his features. She realized then that she must be alive. Fear swept through her with renewed strength, and her heart sped. His eyes flickered toward her as he noticed she was awake.

In a deep, too calm voice, he asked, "Where did you come from?"

It unnerved her because Darius would sound that way when the pain was about to start. She stifled a whimper, seeing this man as her newest threat. He could be just like Darius, especially if he found out about her gift. She wanted to curl up into a protective ball, but her arms and legs felt like lead.

Growing visibly impatient, the man waited for her answer.

She didn't know how she *should* answer. Would he take her back to *Extarga* if she told him? She thought he might. He did business with Darius and would want to stay on good terms with him. Yes, he would definitely return her to hell.

Maybe she shouldn't answer at all. Pretend ignorance of his language. Pasting a look of confusion on her face, she shook her head as if to say, *I don't understand*. The small movement was painful, causing her eyes to go temporarily blind. She let her head drop to the soft pillow.

"Sebastian, she's still recovering," a voice offered from her right.

Her gaze darted painfully to the other man. She recognized him as a doctor. Sebastian's harsh gaze didn't waver. It became darker as he silently demanded a response from her. She decided to remain quiet.

“When did you sneak onto my ship?” He emphasized the word “my.” When she didn't answer, he leaned his body over her, bringing his face close to hers. His hands landed on either side of her head, boxing her in. Two inches was the only thing that separated them. “You will answer me.”

The warmth of his breath rolled over her and stroked her skin, making her shiver. She stared, wide eyed. His golden glare bore into her, demanding obedience and surrender. Something protruding from his hair caught her attention.

Horns?

Her heart picked up a notch, and her breath hitched. His features were godlike, perfectly shaped. She felt the need to touch his face, but her arms still would not respond.

Then, for some reason, she became hypnotized by his lips. As she inhaled his delicious scent, her mouth watered for a taste. Ever so slowly, she inched forward. His lips parted slightly, encouraging her. With a start, she realized she was becoming...aroused?

Thankfully the doctor interjected, freeing her gaze and putting an end to...whatever it was she was about to do. “Can you speak, miss?”

Sebastian pushed away from her with a growl.

They must have given her something, she rationalized. Some kind of drug. Darius never hesitated to keep her sedated for long periods of time. Grinding her teeth, she thought this was turning out to be just another hell ship.

Then she realized why she couldn't move her arms or legs. She was strapped down. All thought left her, and she cried out, struggling against the restraints. Anger soon turned into panic as she fought uselessly to free herself.

The doctor placed his hands on her shoulders to hold her still. “It's okay. We only strapped you down so you wouldn't roll off the bed.”

His attempt to calm her didn't work. As she continued to flail she could feel the skin around her wrists start to break and bleed. Breathing was becoming labored as the panic grew like a virus inside her.

"Calm yourself, woman." Amazingly, she stilled at Sebastian's clipped words. His voice, still commanding, held a hint of concern. Or was she imagining that? Staring straight at the ceiling, drawing in deep breaths, she contemplated how that one phrase had diminished her distress.

The drugs, she quickly surmised. The concern in his voice was only for his equipment and not for her well-being. She registered the feel of hot tears streaming down her face.

Sebastian continued. "The restraints will stay until I receive answers."

"How do you feel?" The doctor resumed his questioning, as if he hadn't stripped her will away with his tonics.

She locked her jaw and stubbornly refused to talk.

He then focused his attention on Sebastian, and they began speaking as if she wasn't there. "I've healed her as best I can, though I suggest she get some sustenance in her, so her body can take over the healing process. I'm not sure what species she is. The shape of her ears should give us a clue."

Analia knew her ears were abnormal, pointed with a slightly rounded tip. She had never seen anyone with ears like hers. It was the one thing that made her feel more alone than being locked away in isolation.

"What of her blood sample? Have you found anything there?"

Blood! Would they be able to determine her ability through her blood? Would there be something different about it? How could there not be? Everything about her was different. She swallowed hard.

Sebastian keenly noticed her reaction to his words and gave her a crooked smile. She hated herself for thinking it sexy.

"So you *can* understand us." It wasn't a question. "Then you can answer my questions. Where did you come from? When?"

Analía nibbled her bottom lip, sickened at not being able to better control her emotions.

Sebastian grated, “Tell me, damn you...What is your name?” She flinched. He took note of her reaction and calmed his tone. “Just give me a name.”

A name wouldn't hurt. It wouldn't tell him anything about where she had come from. She hesitated for a moment and then opened her lips to speak, but stopped, however, at her dry cracked throat. She had to swallow several times before she could speak.

Noticing her discomfort, the doctor lifted a glass of water to her mouth. She turned her head away, refusing to drink. The last thing she needed was more of their concoctions in her system. Shrugging, he put the glass back down.

“My name is Analía.” Her voice was pained.

“Analía,” Sebastian repeated in his deep rumble. She stifled another shiver at the sound of her name on his tongue. “Let the doctor give you some water, Analía.”

“No.” She cleared her throat, trying to summon her own moisture.

“Why not? You must be thirsty.”

“Because you've most likely drugged it. You've already given me something, I can tell, it's making me react...differently.”

Sebastian glanced at the doctor. “Have you given her anything?”

The doctor shook his head. “Nothing out of the ordinary.” He paused. “But, again, I haven't been able to determine her species. She may be having a reaction to one of our medicines.” Focusing on her again, the doctor asked, “How are you feeling exactly?”

“I...just...” She couldn't tell him that she seemed to desire his captain. “I just feel strange.” Her head fell back, and she allowed her eyes to close as a wave of dizziness washed through her.

“You need to drink some water. It will make you feel better,” Sebastian commanded.

Again she refused with a simple shake of her head.

“We haven't drugged it, I promise you.”

“I have no reason to take your word on it.”

A tick started in his jaw. She got the feeling that he wasn't used to being disobeyed. He reached for the glass and took a swift gulp. Analia watched the thick muscles of his throat work as he swallowed. “There, is that enough proof for you?”

“You could be immune,” she rasped.

Growling, he shoved the glass at her. “Drink it or I'll make you drink it.”

A hard dry lump stuck in her throat. She tried to reach out for the glass, but her bindings held her tight.

Frustrated, she began struggling again. Sebastian placed his hand on her stomach, and she froze completely, shocked at its gentle weight.

Afraid to look at him and risk becoming entranced once more, she kept her gaze on the ceiling. Her stomach quivered under his palm. “Remove your hand,” she managed, though her voice was less commanding than she meant for it to be.

“If you promise to stay calm and take a drink, I will free you from your restraints.”

Slowly, she nodded, not trusting him in the least. He began at her feet, his hands brushing her skin, leaving trails of warmth followed by a lingering coolness. Where he touched her, she felt a jolt of energy.

To her humiliation, her body began to react again. What did it think? That he was going to take her here? On the table? In front of the doctor? The thought sobered her. She didn't want anything to do with him. He was just another obstacle keeping her from her freedom.

After he unclasped her wrists, she sat up and allowed her legs to drop over the edge of the bed. As if to say *a deal's a deal*, he held out the glass. She took it and dared a sip. It tasted...okay. The small amount of liquid was quickly absorbed by her dry tongue, and she took another sip. Soon she was gulping back the cool drink with fervor, barely taking a moment to gasp for air. She hadn't realized how badly she was in need of it.

"Good girl," Sebastian said when she set the empty glass down.

Then he scooped her up in his arms. She'd been so taken by surprise at the sudden action that she'd actually wrapped her arms around his neck for support. When she realized what she was doing, she weakly pushed away from him.

She wasn't long in his grasp, as he had only crossed to the other side of the room and set her down on a thin cot within an alcove—which became like a small room when a solid beam of energy flashed between them.

A force field?

It was transparent with a slight haze, masking everything on the other side in an auburn hue.

From one prison to another!

"There. You're free of your restraints."

She made a rough noise in her throat. "You call this free?"

"It's as free as you're allowed on my ship. You've committed a serious crime by smuggling yourself onto my ship. It requires serious punishment. I'm willing to be lenient, though. If you tell me where you came from, I promise to take you back there unharmed."

"I'd rather die," she supplied.

He raised an eyebrow and waited a moment before speaking again. "You're in luck then. The punishment for your crime is death." He scanned for a reaction. When he didn't receive one, he continued. "If you don't tell me where you came from, then your only other option is to be released into space. Actually, you'd be releasing yourself into space. In my culture

it would be seen as an honorable death.” He crossed his arms in expectation.

Analia considered his words carefully. He was offering her death at her own hand. She'd contemplated suicide before—many, many times before. But, as closely guarded as she'd been, she never found ample opportunity. Now it was being offered to her on a silver platter.

Thinking over her life, she could only call up memories of suffering and sorrow. There wasn't a single moment that brought her joy. No memory sparked a hint of happiness to make her want to cling to this existence. Could she really push the button that would end her completely?

Yes.

Her shoulders slumped ever so slightly.

At least I had tried.

Her greatest and, sadly, sole achievement was her escape from *Extarga*. If she were dead, Darius could truly never hurt her again. The time she had spent in the small maintenance room had changed her completely. Even though she was technically still trapped, it was a small taste of what true freedom could be. It had been her choice, her decision, and no one else's, that brought her here now. She had felt the power of freedom and knew she could never go back. The moment she set one foot back on the Hell Ship would be the moment her spirit broke completely, reducing her to a mere shell of herself.

And here she was, locked up at the amusement of yet another arrogant captain. If she couldn't be physically free, then his offer was the only way to end her suffering.

With her decision resolved, she met Sebastian's gaze. “I accept your offer.”

“Good. First tell me the moment you came to be on my ship.”

“No. I accept your other offer.” She almost smiled when his jaw dropped.

CHAPTER 4



Sebastian felt his face frozen in shock. Had she just agreed to kill herself? He'd only suggested that to scare her into giving him the information he wanted. There was no way he was going to let her kill herself, at least not while the wards were still in place. Was she that desperate to escape wherever it was she had come from?

When he'd told her he planned to take her back, she had given him a look of such misery and...betrayal? He'd almost wanted to take it back. Almost.

Gaining composure, he considered the prospect that she was calling his bluff. She didn't look like she had the courage to commit such an act. His easy smile returned.

The force field masked her in a soft haze. She seemed to shimmer with a glow that made her look ethereal. Earlier, he had scented her sweet arousal and was still trying to recover from its impact.

When she had been on the medical bed, he thought to frighten her into talking by using his naturally commanding voice and large demon body to intimidate her. At first, it looked as though it had worked...then her eyes had grown heated, dilating as she stared at his horns, his lips. Her body had hummed with need. The lids of her eyes had drooped to half-mast. He

thought she might kiss him just then, and damn it if that wasn't exactly what he was craving in that moment.

He'd gone instantly hard for her. He had never been caught off guard like that in his life. Everything in him was screaming to claim her. The scent of her desire had been almost maddening.

The doctor hadn't noticed the exchange when he'd interrupted, pulling her gaze away from where Sebastian wanted it. And the man had almost lost his head because of it. It had taken Sebastian a moment, but he'd calmed himself enough to save the doctor's life. His lower region, however, refused to listen to reason.

She was staring at him now, with those beseeching eyes, and he realized he hadn't said anything for a while.

"Very well." If she was going to call his bluff, he would call hers right back. "Do you have the strength to walk?"

She nodded. Disengaging the force field, he motioned for her to follow him.

Dr. Oshwald looked appalled. "Captain?"

Sebastian waived him off. The doors swooshed open, and he stepped out into the hallway. Analia timidly followed close behind. His goal was to trick her into thinking he was going to force her to do this. Without a doubt, she would break—he imagined it would be at the last moment—admitting everything he wanted to know and would beg him to allow her to live.

He couldn't imagine her home could be so horrible that she would willingly submit to suicide in order to keep herself from it. Who would hurt such a delicate creature? Who wouldn't strive to make such a beauty content in every way?

At first, he'd suspected her to be some flippant spoiled wife, running away to torment her husband for some trivial thing. But that wouldn't account for her appearance when he'd first found her. Her clothing was

nothing but a torn piece of cloth, obviously neglected for some time, suggesting she and her husband might be impoverished.

He peeked at her from the corner of his eye. Her hair was golden with hints of red when struck by light. Her features were not the features of a poor woman. A woman that looked like she did should be on the arm of some wealthy male who would lavish her with gifts and jewelry and anything else she might crave. Perhaps her husband didn't take good care of her. His loss. Sebastian would take her off his hands...for a little while at least. Eventually he would dispose of her in some corner of the universe, before she could become attached.

His gaze dipped to the sorry rags she wore. Dirt filled, ratty, and tattered as it was, it couldn't disguise her natural beauty. In fact, it was just the opposite. It revealed every curve of her body, leaving nothing to the imagination, and it swished seductively against her thighs as she moved.

As they walked—well, *he* walked; she appeared to glide down the hall—they began to gather a crowd. Sebastian hadn't anticipated the ship's residents. He rarely walked the halls for pleasure.

People stopped what they were doing in mid-action to gape at the newcomer. He ignored them as best he could. Analia, however, was looking at everything and everyone, as if she were surrounded by the most interesting things in the universe. When they passed by a mother and her child, Analia stopped short and let out a gasp. The child, a small round faced boy with cropped blond hair, smiled sweetly and waved at her, drawing from Analia an amazed giggle. The sound reached something deep inside him, and he couldn't keep from glancing at her. She was smiling too. The sight of it caused him to lose his footing, and he stumbled.

Righting himself, his curiosity of the awe she seemed to be feeling got the better of him. “You act as though you've never seen a child.”

“I haven't,” she stated simply, still smiling at the little boy as they continued past.

“How is that possible?”

She merely shrugged.

He let it drop for now. The entire length of their journey, he allowed her to linger and marvel at anything that caught her eye. Her obvious unfamiliarity with the most common things fascinated him. A small window into space drew her attention for a moment. She looked as though she were savoring it rather than imagining herself out there.

Her nose flared at a fragrance as they passed Marik's galley and the adjoining salon. If a door was open as they passed, she crooked her neck to see more.

Sebastian was sure that anyone as lively as she would never willingly end their own life.

Eventually they reached the exterior maintenance access chamber. A room that had two hatchways; one hatch closed off the small room from the inner ship and the other, when activated, opened to space. Right now, the room was deactivated, hadn't been used in years.

He led her into the chamber and pointed to a button. “When the room is sealed, all you need do is press this and the hatch will open.”

Analía regarded the button warily. “That's all?”

“That's all.” He noted her sickened expression and felt he was about to win this battle of wills. “Unless you've changed your mind?”

For a moment, she just stared at the button, then, “No. I'm ready.” Her voice remained steady, almost light in tone. He expected to hear a quiver or a twinge of doubt.

Could she truly mean to do this?

“Do you know what happens to a body out there, without protection?”

She looked him dead in the eyes, hers full of cold understanding, and he knew the truth of it before she spoke. “Yes...I do.” Her tone was grave.

He had no doubt that she very well may have witnessed such an event firsthand. The revelation dropped his stomach like a solid piece of iron.

While keeping his face blank, he stepped out of the room. She turned to him then, and he prayed she was about to cave, no longer filled with confidence.

“Thank you,” she said. Her eyes were slightly glossed.

Sebastian scowled at her. She was looking at him as if he was doing her a great kindness, instead of ending her life. It felt so wrong.

“Don't thank me for this.” He forced himself to close the door, with only a sliver of hope now that she wouldn't press that button.

Turning her back, she stood motionless for a heartbeat...two. Sebastian found himself desperate to see her face, to have her look at him so he could implore her to ask for her life.

If she would only ask.

His heart sank as her hand rose above the button. He watched, glued to her actions, as though this were truly a matter of life and death. As if that button would do anything at all. She didn't know this was only a game. Her hand was steady. She accepted as truth, that once her hand came down, her life was over.

Analia waited as Sebastian exited the small room and closed the door behind him. Her heart was racing in her chest. A lump settled in her throat.

Aside from her body's reaction to the knowledge that it was about to die, she was at peace. There would be no more fighting, no more suffering. She felt light as though a great burden had, or was about to be, lifted. She wanted to smile and hug Sebastian for this gift, but all she could manage was a simple thank you. And she almost couldn't get that out. He would never know how much she appreciated what he was allowing her.

Sebastian had asked her if she knew what was about to happen to her. She knew all too well. A few years back, Darius had caught one of his crew stealing from him and, as punishment, the offender was thrown into space just as she was about to be now. Darius had made her watch the cruel scene. She remembered him smiling at her as though he were providing her with entertainment.

The only thing she could remember was the torment burned into the poor man's features as he suffocated to death. After several moments, it looked as though something in him had ruptured. Blood seeped from his nose and mouth. His eyes appeared to boil away, his body twisting in agony. He was conscious through all of this. It was a very unpleasant way to die.

When Analia had first discovered what was about to happen to the man, she thought it would be over quickly for him, but it was not quick enough. The poor man's horror-filled face was etched in her mind forever.

Even having the knowledge, Analia was not afraid. *It will be over soon*, she reassured herself. There would be pain at first, but it would be nothing compared to everything she'd been forced to live through.

Sebastian's face was truly grave when he left the room, and she could only hope that he wouldn't regret giving her this...final freedom.

She raised her hand above the button, excited for the prospect of what was to come in the afterlife.

She let her hand fall.

Nothing happened.

Perhaps she didn't press it hard enough. She pressed it again, still nothing. She pressed harder, using the weight of her entire body. She began to bang her fist against the damn button.

Then the door opened—not the one she was hoping for—and Sebastian entered with a growl. She glared at him and backed away.

“Why?” Anger shook her voice.

“I wanted to know if you were serious,” he sneered, gradually approaching.

Analia kept the distance between them until she was backed against the wall. “You were just playing with me!” It was a statement not a question. Hearing the hurt in her own voice, she was disgusted with herself for believing him. Her stomach retched. Freedom once again ripped from her grasp.

“Why would you want to do that?” His voice was rough and full of venom.

“Why wouldn't I?” she whispered, refusing to elaborate.

“Well?” he demanded.

Full realization hit her. Her eyes closed briefly and her body slumped in defeat. He was going to keep her alive. “Do what you will with me, but I don't have to tell you anything.”

Without warning, he hooked his large hands around her waist and threw her over his shoulder. She gasped with surprise. She thought she should scratch, scream, or bite him to get away, but what good would it do?

She felt the strength of his arm around her legs. His hand on her thigh tightened as if he had read her thoughts. If she could get away, she wouldn't get far, and it would only worsen her situation. In defeat, she allowed her body to fall against him.

Carried all the way back to sickbay, she was once again placed in the little room, force field in place. He stood there for a moment. She refused to look at him. The doctor said nothing at their reappearance, only watched with silent reserve.

Finally Sebastian left the room. She remained where he'd dropped her, filled with a dull detached feeling.

Her little room consisted of only a small cot protruding from the wall with a thin, but plush mattress, a lightweight soft blanket, and a pillow.

The pillow's softness consumed her as she laid her head on it.

Laughing without humor, she realized these were the best accommodations she'd ever had. A few hours passed before she allowed herself to drift into sleep.

Sometime later, she woke to a woman entering the room, a tray in her hands. The force field was removed briefly and the tray set down on small protruding shelf. The woman who brought it smiled at Analia expectantly.

The aroma of food filled her lungs. It smelled so good. Her stomach grumbled with an impatient demand.

She lifted her body into a seated position and grabbed for the offering.

At the first bite, Analia's taste buds were swimming with delight. On the Hell Ship, she was only given a small amount of sustenance, always ruined scraps or a brown-green blob of something unrecognizable, which was horrid. This was nothing like she'd ever tasted before. Each flavor sang against her taste buds. She eagerly shoveled in another mouthful, and another.

"Analia, right?" The woman was still standing there, staring at her. Analia realized she was shoving food in her mouth like a starved beast. Making an effort to slow herself, she nodded at the strange woman.

She had hair much like Sebastian's, similar in color, styled in two pigtails draping down her front. She had horns as well, though more dainty, which were poking out of her black hair. There was even a similar magenta hue at the base of them. She wore a deep purple strapless top and a short black skirt.

Is that a tail?

Analia marveled as the thin tail swished back and forth. The woman's footwear—also strange—were spiked at the heel.

“I'm Sonya,” the woman said. “It's nice to meet you, Analia.”

Analia swallowed her food. This woman knew her name? She must have spoken to Sebastian. Her guard instantly went up. “Thank you for the food, Sonya,” she said, not sure what else to add, and not wanting to be impolite.

Sonya offered another sweet smile. “You're welcome. Though it's not the best stuff. Prisoners are only allowed whatever is left over.”

Analia eyed the food again. *This was the leftovers?* She focused on Sonya, who continued to closely inspect her. Analia felt her cheeks heat at the unusual scrutiny, which made her acutely aware of the fact that Sonya was in clean tailored fabrics, while her own clothing was ripped and filthy.

“You're pretty,” Sonya exclaimed. Analia nearly coughed up her food. “No wonder you have his panties in a wad.” She laughed then.

Panties in a wad?

“You know, you're the only person to ever sneak onto our ship...ever,” Sonya emphasized.

Analia's internal alarm went off. Was Sonya here for information? Sebastian had obviously sent her. But Sonya wasn't asking for specifics and was looking at her with something like...respect?

“That's pretty impressive,” Sonya continued, cementing Analia's confusion at this odd conversation.

“Thanks?” It sounded more like a question than a term of gratitude.

Sonya laughed at her reply, a carefree sound that was almost foreign to Analia. Pointing to the food, Sonya added, “Next time I'll sneak you something better than leftovers.” With a wink she turned and left Analia to gape after her.

No one had ever spoken to her in such a way. She decided it must be another of Sebastian's tricks. He was determined to know where she'd come from, and that did not bode well for her.

After finishing off the rest of the food, Analia relaxed into the little bed, enjoying her full stomach. The bed was astoundingly comfortable. Even in the brightly lit space she easily fell asleep.

When she woke sometime later, the doctor kept asking how she felt and if she needed anything. She just assured him all was fine and curled into the warm blanket, prepared for a long duration of captivity.

She thought she had recovered from the devastation of Sebastian's trick, until he entered the room. Her outrage returned in full force. She should be grateful, in a way. Instead of attraction, the sight of him now filled her with rage.

Sebastian almost laughed at the look Analia gave him. Without a doubt, she was imagining scratching his eyes out at this very moment. Though amusing, that was going to make what he was about to do a little difficult.

Sonya had come to him earlier to convince him to, as Sonya put it, *give the poor girl a break*. Saying *she looks harmless*. He considered her words throughout the day and decided to follow Sonya's advice. The chit seemed harmless enough.

He approached the cell and disengaged the force field. "Come with me," he said, as if he were commanding any of his crew.

Her mistrust of him showed because she didn't move from her spot. "What are you going to do with me?"

"I'm taking you to another location. You don't need the doctor anymore."

She gathered up the blanket and pillow and stood, clutching them as though she expected them to be ripped away from her.

“You won't be needing those.”

Her grip tightened for a moment, then, eyeing them with sorrow, she reluctantly dropped them onto the cot. The strange action made him even more curious about her, but he refused to let himself get involved. Someone had to have treated her badly. He ignored the ire that arose with the thought.

What did he care?

Because of the wards, he was stuck with her for a time. Once the mission was over, he would put her off his ship and out of his mind. The wards seemed to be intact, so she must have been on the ship before they went up.

Once again, she followed close behind as he led her out of sickbay. This time she didn't marvel at anything, keeping her eyes to the ground. Lost her vitality so easily? He was irritated that he might be somewhat responsible for the change in her.

After walking for some time, he stopped in front of a door and opened it, waving her inside. Hesitantly, she peered into the darkened room, unmoved. She didn't trust him. Why should she? He entered the compartment, which illuminated instantly at his presence. Analia just stood at the door. A tiny spark of interest lit her eyes, but still she didn't join him.

The room was of decent size, a bed against the wall to the left, couch and table near the center. Through a doorway to the right was a personal bathing chamber. It was one of the nicer rooms on the ship. He told himself he was offering her this one because it was the only furnished one available. But that wasn't true. There were a few smaller unoccupied rooms. For a reason beyond his comprehension, he wanted her impressed.

“You can stay here as long as you vow not to hurt yourself. You'll have this room all to yourself.”

Finally entering, she peered around, but didn't respond.

“If you can't promise me that, then I'll take you back to the doctor and leave you there till I find a place to drop you off for good.”

Her eyes blazed at that. “Drop me off?”

“Yes, we have a task to complete first, but after that I've decided I'll leave you at the nearest space city.” The smile she gave weakened him, as well as doubled his interest in her. Did she not care where she'd be dumped? “Uh, can you promise me that?” He ground out.

“Yes,” she rushed, smiling wider. But then her face dropped, and she eyed him with sadness. “Is this a trick?”

“No.”

Studying him for a moment, she shook her head. “This is just a trick. You don't just give a trespasser room and board. What do you want with me?”

Sebastian let out a breath. “This is not a trick. We have a long way to go and, no matter where you came from, you'll need to stay on the ship till we've reached our destination. Where would you rather be? Here? Or lying on that cot for months?”

As she gave the room a second glance, he proceeded to show her around. When he got too close, she skittishly backed away from him.

“I won't hurt you.”

She continued to watch him warily. For now, he decided to let it go.

“The bathing room is in here. I'll leave while you clean yourself and return with something for you to sleep in. In the morning, I'll show you around the ship before you begin your new job.”

“Job?”

“Of course, this isn't a free ride. You'll work, just like everyone else.”

“What kind of job?” She raised an eyebrow.

“I haven't decided yet.” He moved to leave. “I'll be back with clothes for you soon, so if you don't want me here while you're still naked and wet, you'd better hurry.”

With that, she rushed into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

Sebastian left, smiling with amusement. Unfortunately, his teasing had backfired, hardening his already painfully stiff shaft. He imagined her damp body glistening with dripping beads of water, her blond locks the only thing clinging to her as they wound down her shoulders and around her naked breasts. Imagined himself licking and sucking those breasts between his lips, licking the wetness from every inch of her. His hands cupping her ass, her soft moans of pleasure in his ear as he drove into her.

He found himself rushing to get back.

CHAPTER 5



*A*nalia studied the shower stall. She'd never seen one like this before. The walls were decorated with a mosaic of color and a hazy translucent door separated the stall from the rest of the washroom. Bottles of cleaning liquids rested on a small shelf. She noted a button on the wall just outside the stall. It could either control the shower or the waste disposal unit.

Click.

Waste disposal unit.

After searching the room for a way to activate the spray and finding nothing, she stepped into the shower stall to look there. Warm water instantly bombarded her. She yelped and jumped out of the stall. The flow immediately stopped.

Water? Real water?

Every time she bathed in the past, it was in a small bland cubical with a powdery enzyme spray.

With delight, she tore off the old ratty dress and dove back into the stall, allowing the water to wash over her. It soaked her hair, then the rest of her. The sensation of it running down her body tickled and soothed her skin.

The spray was rough against her back, but it was like a hundred fingers massaging. She sighed loudly as her muscles began to relax from the heat. A cocoon of steam rose up around her. Closing her eyes, she allowed herself to become immersed.

Taking her time with the soap, she scrubbed every inch of her skin from head to toe, washing her hair twice. Then she stood there and reveled in the feeling of the water splashing on her skin, committing it to memory.

Stepping out of the shower, she had never felt so clean in her life. A fluffy white cloth draped nicely against the wall. She dried off thoroughly before wrapping it around herself, noting the softness of it.

Everything here was soft and cozy and warm. These were the kinds of thing others enjoyed, not her. *Wait, that's not true*, she corrected. She was free now. Sebastian had told her he would let her go.

Still, Analia didn't trust him and wasn't sure if she should believe him. Would he really set her free? He'd lied to her already. But what choice did she have?

Analia stepped out of the bathroom. Sebastian was already back, standing next to the tan colored sofa. When he saw her, his golden eyes flared, turning to liquid amber. She shivered at the sight, her mind going blank. It wasn't till Sebastian began to stalk toward her that she recalled her situation. She was wet and half naked, alone in a room with a strong brutish male of unknown intentions.

He was upon her before she could react, backing her against the wall. His body pressed against hers. A thick thigh settled between her legs.

Analia froze in a panic and was confused to find her nipples growing hard at his touch. A shiver escaped her. Sebastian moved his leg against her core, rough, but with the touch of an expert. After letting a small moan slip, she pursed her lips closed.

"Anya," Sebastian nearly growled.

The epithet and his breath at her neck caused another shiver, and liquid pooled between her legs. She sucked in a harsh breath, grasping for control.

“Your scent is intoxicating,” his husky voice whispered next to her ear.

She should have been terrified at his words, but she found her body relaxing against his, a single compliment melting her completely. His strong arms surrounded her, his hands seeking the small of her back. The heat of his lips on her neck reunited her with her sanity.

“Se...Se...Bastian,” she squeaked.

“Hmm.” He rubbed his mouth against the line of her jaw, almost making her forget herself again. She quietly whimpered and found she was gripping his shoulders.

How could this feel so good?

“You must stop.” The words came out as a whisper.

A low, slow growl rose from somewhere inside him, reverberating through her core. With his hands pressed firmly against the small of her back, he pulled her against him with a possessiveness that both startled and excited her in a primal sort of way.

Analia almost let out another needy moan. She could feel the strong muscles of his chest while his thigh pushed further against her wetness. She gasped as he opened his mouth to her neck and nibbled.

She wanted him to stop, needed him to. Didn't she?

“Please.” She wasn't sure if the small sound was meant to stop him, or if it was a plea for more.

But his body stilled.

He removed his lips from her neck. Then, as if it pained him to do so, he finally let her go and backed away. His eyes were still molten, devouring her. The heat from his body against hers faded, and she was left with a chill where he had touched her.

After a moment, he seemed to regain his composure. He handed her a large shirt and said, his voice still rough, “You'll sleep in this for now.” He averted his gaze, as if he were...embarrassed? “I'll return in the morning to show you around the ship and then to your new job.”

Analia couldn't yet speak so she nodded in answer. Then he was gone, rushing out the door, leaving her alone and...desperately aroused for the first time in her life.

Her actions shocked herself. Twice she almost gave in and wrapped herself around him. She had never reacted that way before. Of course, there had never been anything like *that* before. The intensity of it was almost overwhelming.

And he'd stopped.

She was baffled. She had asked him to stop and...he'd stopped.

Not only that, but his touch had been unexpectedly tender. His lips had electrified her skin, making her want more. Even now she could feel them on her.

Absently she realized she was still being supported by the wall, half naked with the thick white cloth wrapped around her.

The things she imagined Sebastian doing to her, the things she imagined doing to him...she had never wanted these things, would never want them.

It was only because she was in a new place, with a handsome overbearing male, that she was having these strange feelings. And the fact that Sebastian hadn't actually hurt her...yet. Once he did—and she was sure that he would—she would be back to normal. She would see things clearly again.

After slipping the shirt over her head and hanging the cloth to dry, Analia surveyed the room. The large bed in the corner of the room reminded her too much of the one in Darius' chamber. She couldn't sleep there.

Deciding on the couch, she transferred the pillow and blankets from the bed and snuggled in. It was lumpy, but not bad. It was still more comfortable than a cold lonely floor. Before she drifted into sleep, she allowed her mind to wonder at the possibilities of tomorrow. What did Sebastian have planned for her?

Temporarily insane!

That's what he was. When the chit had come out of the bathroom in only a towel, still damp, her scent had assaulted him. Instinct took over, and he had to have her. He didn't remember moving, but before he knew it she was in his arms. She had let out a soft feminine sound and at that moment he needed her as he needed air. The force of it was like a punch to the stomach. Then he'd tasted her and his mind had descended into a haze, lost to his lust. It was all he could do to keep from shoving inside her.

When she asked him to stop, he had barely been able to comprehend her words. She'd been aroused, absently rubbing herself on his thigh. Even now her scent still clung to him, urging him to go back and finish what they'd started. He could still taste the sweetness of her skin on his tongue.

Pulling away from her was like ripping a hole in his chest, but that was precisely why he was able to do it.

He had never before experienced a need so deep, and it felt... threatening. With all the women in his past, he kept himself detached, using them for what he needed and then leaving them soon after. He never gave them a chance to cling, or ask for more, because he would never give more of himself to a woman.

He'd learned his lesson after he witnessed what had happened with Calic. Cale had become a different man after his mate's treachery. He had become harder, nearly emotionless. Demons mate for life. And Sebastian knew that Calic had been destroyed that day, carried the pain of it still.

Sebastian had vowed to always protect himself from a similar fate.

He would have to be cautious around Anya. *No*, he corrected, *Analia*. He would not use that endearment again. He realized she had nearly done the same to him. She had almost called him Bastian. Only his family and Marik were allowed to call him by the epithet. Yet, when she said it, he had wanted her to say it again, only in a scream of pleasure as he settled between her legs.

Shaking the thought away, he decided that tomorrow he would only show her around the ship, then take her to Marik and be done with her until the mission was over. Soon enough she would be gone. His fists clenched.

He entered the pub and spotted Sonya. After ordering a flaming inferno, he downed the full glass in one gulp.

Sonya raised her eyebrows at him. In a slow, cautious voice she asked, "How's Analia?"

"In need of clothing." His voice was guarded. But Sonya's sense of smell was as good as any demon's, and he hadn't thought to shower or change before coming here.

A slow smile spread across her lips. "Is that all she needs then?"

"Yes," he snapped. "I'm putting Marik in charge of her. And you too. She'll need a female companion to keep her...occupied."

"Are you done with her so quickly?"

"There is nothing to be done with."

"No?"

"It's not what you think. Nothing happened between us."

Sonya snorted. "Something happened."

Sebastian bowed his head into his hands. “The only thing that happened was that I practically attacked her. That's why I'm putting the two of you in charge. It seems I lose control when I'm around her. Have from the start. But tonight was...it won't happen again.”

Considering his words for a moment, she replied, “Did you hurt her?”

“Of course not!”

“Did you want to?” She refilled his drink, pouring the liquid to the brim.

“No...I wanted something else, not to hurt her. But I'm certain I frightened her.” Sebastian recalled the fear in her voice. Even though she had been aroused, she had been deathly afraid. He took the drink same as the first, one gulp.

Someone at the other end of the bar called for service, and Sonya went to refill his glass with something that looked like a mixture of oil and water. Sebastian knew that drink. He couldn't remember the name, but it could knock you on your ass. He should order that next.

When Sonya came back, she said, “The girl is about my height. I can scrounge up a few outfits for tomorrow. And I'll ask around for donations.”

Sebastian nodded his approval and got up to leave, deciding against the knock-you-on-your-ass drink.

“Does Marik know he's on babysitting detail?”

“Not yet.”

Sonya laughed at that.

As Sebastian left, he waved the back of his hand at Sonya and headed toward the galley. It was time to give Marik the good news.

The only way to get to Marik's galley was to go through the salon, where the crew gathered to eat. The salon was a large L shaped room with an arched ceiling, painted in warm hues of brown. A long window exposed diners to the ever changing scenery of space. The galley was separated

from the salon by two thin walls. A slim rectangular window with a small counter allowed Marik to put out orders without leaving the area.

Luckily, Marik was closing up for the night. Good. No one to witness the ire that was about to be sparked.

Marik was built much like Sebastian and Cale, tall with a strong physique, typical demon features. However, prominent scars ran the length of his arms, disappearing under his shirt. Sebastian knew those scars didn't stop there.

“Marik,” he called with a smile, trying to set the mood.

After the demon war, Marik had been taken as a slave. He'd been enslaved for four hundred and fifty years when, by chance, Sonya and Sebastian came across a slave auction, in one of the many space cities they frequented.

As is their nature, demons don't submit to anyone unless they want to, or are forced to. Marik had looked strong and proud up on stage, even though he'd obviously been poorly taken care of. The look in his eyes had been nothing more than that of a beast, which spoke volumes about the torture Marik must have endured.

Sebastian had decided to spend the last of their supplies money to win the wild-eyed demon's freedom, staring down anyone who dare bid against him with a look of pure malice. At that point in time, demons had developed a bad reputation as slaves, and most had been freed or killed. They were labeled as being extremely difficult and dangerous in captivity.

After the auction was won, Marik—not understanding the situation and half in a rage—fought against his restraints and against Sebastian. It took Sebastian, with the help of Sonya, a good twenty minutes to calm Marik enough to explain to him that he would no longer be a slave and that he had nothing to fear from them. He even offered Marik the chance to refuse to come with them.

Marik had just stared at them for a time, without saying a word. He'd been quiet so long that Sebastian thought he might refuse. But in the end, Marik decided to join them.

When Sebastian had arrived on the ship with the newly purchased Marik, Cale appraised him with a quick glance and then shot Sebastian a look that said, "You had better be able to control him." Ironically, after his fifty years of freedom, Marik was now the more gentle of the four demons on board.

Marik stopped what he was doing to glance up at Sebastian. "Hey, Captain. What's up? I just put everything away, but if you're hungry—"

"No, I came to give you some good news."

Marik set down his cloth and eyed him warily. "Yeah?"

"You know how you've been asking for an assistant?"

"Not really." He scowled.

Sebastian almost laughed at his immediate mistrust. It reminded him a little of Analia. "Well, I have one for you. I'll be bringing her over in the morning."

As expected, Marik's face grew dark. "The stowaway?" he barked. Disappointment saturated his tone. "Come on, Bastian. I don't have time to watch over some female. Does she even know her way around a galley? Don't answer that, of course she doesn't. You're just looking to pawn her off on someone and you don't want her snooping around the ship. Have Sonya take care of her." Marik's horns grew molten until they appeared to glow.

"Sonya will help watch Analia, but I don't want her working in the pub."

Marik's brows drew together. "Why not?"

Ignoring his questions, Sebastian turned to leave. "I'm bringing her here in the morning." As he left the salon, he heard the crash of Marik's obvious displeasure.

Sebastian headed for his room, ready to put an end to this day. His shaft strained painfully against his pants from his earlier encounter with Analia. He thought it would have gone down by now, but every moment alone brought renewed images of Analia's soft body, her curves against his palm.

He stripped off his clothing and entered the shower. Needing relief, Sebastian wrapped his hand around his length. With every stroke, he imagined Analia in place of his hand, gripping him tight with her hand, her soft warm core, her mouth. He groaned.

Her scent still enveloped him, encouraging the vision of her. He remembered her soft moan in his ear as he had kissed her tender neck. With astounding force, his orgasm exploded from him. He leaned one arm against the wall as warm water washed over him and he marveled at the strength of his release.

Finishing his shower, he wondered what she was doing now. The thought that she was, most likely at this moment, wearing one of his shirts to bed pleased him more than it should have. Then his wicked mind brought forth the image of her without a shirt at all, naked and writhing beneath him.

He growled at himself when, once again, his shaft began to stir.

In the morning, Sebastian stopped by the galley to grab some pastries, then headed to the bar to pick up the clothes that Sonya had promised. After a quick greeting, she went to her back office to fetch them.

Sebastian almost dropped the bag of pastries as soon as he saw what she offered. Black, tight, and short. She laid them all out in a small scattered pile for him to choose from. Imagining Analia in any of them had him growing stiff before he could control himself. There was no way he could put her in these clothes! He looked at Sonya with bewilderment.

“Don't give me that look,” she scolded. “You asked me for clothes. You know how I dress.”

Yes, but he'd never really noticed before. She was his sister for the love of all the gods, not a wee blond with smooth legs that he wanted wrapped around him. Shifting uncomfortably, he really needed to stop imagining her like that.

“This is what you have to choose from for now. I haven't had a chance to check with the other ladies on board.”

Rummaging dejectedly through the pile, he chose the longest skirt, a shirt that didn't dip *too* low in the front, and a pair of the flattest shoes in the bunch. Then Sonya revealed another pile...

Undergarments.

Sebastian ran his hand over his face. This time he didn't have to choose, thank the gods, Sonya just thrust them at him.

“Here,” she said with a pout. “Brand new, I just bought them before the lock-in.”

Dear gods, they were silky and revealing and...why did there need to be pictures of flowers on the fronts? He tried not to look, stuffing everything into a tight ball of fabric.

Mustering as much sincerity as possible, he thanked Sonya and headed to Analia's room.

When he entered the room, he was appalled at what he was seeing.

Why the hell was she sleeping on the couch?

“What do you think you are doing?” he yelled, louder than he meant to. Her body jerked. Slowly, she peeked one eye open. He instantly regretted

his inflection, but still he demanded in the same tone, “Why are you on the couch?” She didn't answer, instead, drowsily glanced around the room with tired confusion. “Well?”

“I...I don't know what you mean. I thought you wanted me to sleep.”

“Yes. Why aren't you sleeping in the bed?”

She shrugged and looked to the ground. After a while, she answered in shaky voice. “I don't sleep well in a regular bed...it gives me nightmares.”

Absurd, thought Sebastian. Nightmares are nightmares. You don't get them from an object. A notion pricked at him, but he ignored it, noting that she looked as though she hadn't slept at all. If she had taken the bed, she would have been more comfortable and therefore slept better, he reasoned. He told her this and ordered her to use the bed from now on. The chit merely shrugged in response.

She wasn't part of his crew and probably felt she had no reason to follow his orders. He would come back tomorrow to make sure she did.

Letting it go for now, he handed her a pastry. She sat up and reached out for it allowing the blanket to fall to her waist, revealing that she was wearing the shirt he gave her last night.

His shirt.

Sniffing the pastry first, Analia nibbled a corner. Her eyes lit up when the flavor hit her, and she sank her teeth in, closing her eyes she slowly chewed, obviously savoring the taste. Sebastian watched her with fascination. He had never seen someone eat with such euphoria.

Still a bit riled, and curious of everything about her, he grated, “Why do you act as though you've never had a pasty? Or seen a child? Or witnessed the stars?”

Instantly she stopped chewing and swallowed hard, eyes looking everywhere but at him as though the answer were somewhere in the room. She was calculating, choosing her words. She didn't want him to know where she came from. Did the answer have something to do with that?

“There were never any children...where I was.” She paused. “Or pastries.”

“Or windows?” He laughed without amusement. “The only places my ship has visited in the past few months are space cities or other ships. So it's an easy assumption that you come from space. You have to have seen the stars.”

Another moment of silence, then in a small voice she replied, “I have seen the stars before.” Again, she shifted her eyes, and he realized she wasn't going to elaborate.

It irked him that he wanted to know more. He dropped the clothing in her lap and said, “We leave in five minutes, whether you are dressed or not.” At that, she jumped from the couch and dashed into the bathroom, to change into the clothes that Sebastian was dreading seeing her in. He sat on the couch to wait, feeling for every lump in the old cushions.

Just as he feared, when she emerged, his body responded, this time worse than before. However, he was able to control himself, but just barely. He shifted his features to the arrogant disposition he used when dealing with his mercenary clients—gruff males who have killed ruthlessly and without remorse. If he could handle bloodthirsty killers, surely he could handle this wee creature.

The too short skirt was black with sheer purple ruffles. It caressed her thighs, and swished slightly as she moved. The deep purple V-neck tank was too tight and curved around her breasts and flat stomach. Her blond curls spilled over her bare shoulders. His mouth watered at the sight. The chit was blushing, as though she knew what this was doing to him.

“Well, how does it fit?” He was hoping she would say she hated the clothes, so he could give her a reprieve for the day, until he could find more suitable garments.

But she gave him a sweetly shy smile, making her look even more irresistible. “I love them. I've never worn anything so...” She fought for

words. "They're wonderful. Thank you."

Damn. Now he couldn't take them away.

"I will take really great care of them for when I give them back."

For some reason, that bothered him. They were hers to keep if the clothes made her happy. Sonya wouldn't mind, and he'd pay her back anyway.

Before he could say anything of the kind, she reached for the rest of her pastry, bending slightly at the hips as she ate to keep from messing the clothes, giving him a perfect view of her plump cleavage. The innocent action affected him and he had to shift his pants to sit more comfortably.

Again she chewed with that same euphoric expression, making him obsess once more over all the things he didn't know about her. She swallowed and licked her soft lips, leaving them glossy and begging for his. Did she know she was driving him mad?

He was on the verge of losing it again. He stood and turned away from her. "Follow me then. I'll show you around the ship."

Analia practically bounced with giddiness as Sebastian showed her around. There were so many things to see. Brilliant colors decorated the walls, unlike the grey, grey, and more grey that made up the Hell Ship. People smiled as they passed. Children played in the halls. This was a place teeming with so much vibrancy and liveliness she could almost taste it in the very air around her. Vibrations of energy seemed to flow throughout the ship and into her. She wanted to touch and see everything.

There was so much she had never experienced before, and Sebastian was unwittingly proving that to her. He didn't know how naive she was, and she wanted to keep it that way. But she suspected, by her blatant reactions to everything, that he was beginning to see through her.

He showed her a room where, he explained, people would gather for physical exertion or to spar. It was large, as all the rooms were, and filled with extravagant equipment. A variety of strange looking weapons lined the walls. He explained that they were for practice only.

Walking her through the room, he pointed out each piece of equipment, showing her what they do and how to use them if she wanted to. He didn't offer the same for the weapons.

Close by was another room with a large vessel lowered into the floor and filled to the brim with water. He called it a swimming pool. She couldn't imagine what it was used for. When she inquired, he said he would show her later. Then, with a strange expression, he shook his head. The action confused her, but then, everything he did confused her.

They continued to a room, smaller than the first, with many seats facing a large screen, apparently another gathering spot for entertainment purposes.

In the next room, she spotted Sonya who genuinely seemed glad to see her. Waving and rushing toward them, she circled Analia twice. "Very nice," she said. Then her features turned somber. "Unfair, they look better on you than they did on me."

Analia realized with a start that she was talking about the clothing. Quickly apologizing, she vowed to take them off if Sonya wanted them back.

Sonya laughed and looked around the room at some of the other people. Sebastian growled, doing the same. Had she said something wrong?

"You'll be keeping your clothes on," Sebastian said, pulling her from the room. She tried to thank Sonya before they were out of hearing distance.

Sebastian had a scowl on his face again, and they walked in silence for a moment. From the corner of her eye, Analia studied him with curiosity.

Besides his scowl and his fists being clenched, there were no other signs of his annoyance. He walked with an air of confidence, and he leaked a sense of danger. The cut of his muscles promised pain to anyone who dare challenge him.

He was a strong male.

Being around him titillated her, even though she knew it was wrong to allow herself to feel that way. Sooner or later, he would prove to be much the same as Darius. But for now, she was surprised to find that she was enjoying herself with him.

Her good feeling lasted until he turned to her, his gaze studying and disapproving. He looked at her as though she were something to be squashed. His disdain—startling and unexpected—shocked her to a standstill.

The night before, he had been so tender and almost even pleasurable. This new attitude was frightening. She was right in thinking she should fear him.

He continued walking ahead of her. It took her a moment to snap back to herself and follow him, though her happiness was diminished.

“What was that place?” she asked, then clarified, “Where Sonya had been.”

Sebastian had pulled her out of there so fast he hadn't even explained where they were. People had been scattered among many tables and there was a wall filled with bottles of liquid. Some had been clear, some brightly colored, and some different shades of brown.

“That was Sonya's pub,” Sebastian replied. “She serves alcohol to the crew when they're not on duty.”

“Alcohol?”

Stopping suddenly, he looked at her, bewilderment coated his features. “You don't know what alcohol is?”

“Should I?”

Shaking his head, he replied, "It's a drink. It affects different races in different ways, but mostly it's used as a relaxant." He started walking again, and Analia followed.

She stopped when something in an open room caught her attention. Her eyes grew wide, and she etched toward the door. A decadent scent filled her nose, and she inhaled deeply for more of it. She had a memory of the things in this room, fuzzy, but there, in the back of her mind. The energy of it slammed into her.

Pure life.

Sebastian paused and walked a few paces back to where she was standing.

"This is our plant nursery," Sebastian offered. "You are not allowed in here. These plants are priceless. If you disrupt anything in this room, you might just spend the rest of your life working off the cost."

Analia sucked in a breath and stepped away. The plants reminded her of a time before her slavery. She tried to recall something specific, but couldn't.

Sebastian walked on, and Analia reluctantly fell in step beside him, digging at her memory.

CHAPTER 6



Marik was in no mood for babysitting detail and resented that he was saddled with the job of it. For fifty years he occupied this galley. It was his and his alone. He'd be damned if he let some chit carouse around, distracting him from his duty.

The galley was clean and organized—organized for Marik, anyway. He knew where everything was and knew how to use it. The bastards on this ship ate like kings because of his culinary skills. Creating new dishes and new flavors gave him absolute pleasure. The only pleasure in life he had left.

Since his time as a slave, he'd derived enjoyment from nothing else. He kept to himself. He rarely watched movies, or played video games with the crew in the entertainment room. Sometimes he would spar with Calic and Sebastian, but not for amusement as they did, self-indulging themselves with the adrenaline of the challenge. Marik sparred only to keep up his reflexes and strength. He vowed long ago that he would never again be caught weak and unprepared.

The Demon's Punchbowl was amusing sometimes, but mostly he would sit alone and drink himself into oblivion. In the space cities, he would take a woman, but rarely for his own pleasure, and the liaisons were

always short and to the point. At least from what he can remember of them. Demons needed sex as others needed food. Otherwise a rage would build up inside them.

For Sebastian—he owed the man his life and his freedom—he would accept his task to watch over the stowaway, with only minimal grumbling. He'd have the girl do some trivial job to keep her occupied and out of his way. He always hated sweeping and wiping the counters. Grinning to himself, he thought of other little tasks he hated doing, like washing dishes.

Maybe this wouldn't be so terrible.

Just then, Sebastian entered, looking choleric. A petite blond female followed. Her eyes, thick with dark lashes, were downcast. She looked timid and fragile. No bigger than Sonya.

Although Sonya was small, the chit could cut a demon twice his size. She was a scrappy fighter. But this female, now standing before him, looked as though she could be knocked over by a light breeze.

Right away, he noted her beauty. Slender body—too thin for his taste—and perfect features. Small upturned nose, high cheekbones, feminine jaw. The kind of features a man went to war for. The kind of features that, as a slave, he would be forced to kneel before and call master. Grating his teeth, Marik shook the thought from his mind and decided to start the show.

“Is this her then?” Marik said in an intentionally harsh voice. Both she and Sebastian looked up at him. Marik kept his attention on the chit. “What is your name, girl?”

“Analia,” she answered in a small voice. Unlike her, his *masters* voices were always booming and dripping with condescension.

“What do you know of cooking for large groups of people, Analia?” He sneered. Sebastian shot him a warning look. Marik easily ignored him. He would decipher her character here and now.

“I know nothing of cooking for anyone.”

“Have you ever worked in a galley?”

“No.”

“Have you not washed a dish in a sink?”

She appeared uncomfortable. “No, never.”

Marik couldn't believe it, but then, there were those aristocrat types who never even had to wash their own asses. She had the look, but not the demeanor.

He continued his questioning. “Have you mopped a floor? Washed a counter? Served another?” She looked as though she were thinking over her answer carefully. Good, it suggested she wasn't completely unintelligent.

She glanced around the room considering. “I don't think I have done anything that you might require prior experience or knowledge of. But I promise I will learn quickly and I will work hard without complaint. I've learned never to complain.”

Her answer was decent, but poked at Marik's intuition. “That's good. The thing I value the least is sloppy work. If I don't like something you've done, I will make you do it again and again until I'm satisfied. Understood?”

Analia gave him a stern nod, expertly avoiding his gaze.

Marik glanced at Sebastian. His features were poised in the political arrogance he donned whenever he wanted to mask his emotions, but Marik knew Sebastian well, and the man was hanging on every word of the conversation.

“Tell me, Analia, what kinds of foods do you like?”

Uncomfortable again, Analia looked at her feet while she answered. “Foods? I...uh, I liked the thing Sebastian brought for me this morning”—pause—“and the food I had in sickbay was delicious.” At that, she smiled brightly, almost pulling a chuckle from him. He hadn't chuckled in years.

“You don't have to stroke my ego. I'm already very full of myself. I mean what foods did you eat before you...came to be with us?” Was he actually being polite to her? There was something about her, the way she stood, spoke, even the way she carefully avoided his eyes while still keeping her head high. *She couldn't be...*

With a blush on her cheeks and a look of pain on her face she replied, “I was only given a few things to eat, and I wouldn't know them by name.”

Marik felt his features grow dark. Did the word “given” mean she hadn't had a choice? Noticing the change in mood, Sebastian shifted his eyes between Marik and Analia, his mask of arrogance starting to dissolve. “Marik?”

Marik ignored him, concentrating on Analia. “Describe the food to me.”

Once again, she looked at her feet and shrugged a shoulder. “Green, sometimes brown, mushy...or chunky on occasion.”

Realization hit him like a smack in the face. “Were you a slave?”

Analia's head snapped up at Marik, and then to Sebastian. Her mouth opened to speak, but nothing came out.

Sebastian gave a slight choking sound and fixed his gaze on Analia. “Any?” he rasped.

Any?

She just shook her head. Marik knew he was correct. She had been a slave, same as he. It was written on her face, her demeanor. What remained to be seen were the variations of their scars. How long had she been enslaved?

Obviously she had wanted to keep this a secret, he understood that, but the beans were spilled. Marik felt the need to lighten the mood. “So, you must have been a servant of some kind,” he stated.

Her eyes bounced quickly back and forth as if she were in a panic, ready to bolt. She didn't speak, didn't raise her head.

Marik sighed. “Analia, look at me.” She didn't. “Look at me.” His voice was firm, but the harshness was gone.

Finally, stark eyes snapped to his. He could see the torment settled behind her eyes.

“I was a slave too,” he admitted. He hated to talk about that time and would not reveal more than he had to, but he wanted her to feel comfortable and to know that this revelation wasn't something that would be held against her. For some reason, he wanted her to know she wasn't alone. He couldn't stand her shame, which reflected his own.

Wide eyed, she whispered, “You were?” When he nodded, she added, “What...what did they force you to do?”

Once again her phrasing made him uneasy. Sebastian too, he noted. “I was forced to do many things, mostly involving my strength. I was like an animal to my keepers. But I am free now, thanks to Sebastian, and I try not to think of it anymore.” He didn't want to ask her the same question. He could only imagine what someone would want from a female as beautiful as she. Marik looked to Sebastian, wondering if he was thinking the same thing. The captain looked as though he were nearing the Edge.

For a demon, the Edge was like a dark place inside each of them, where reason was lost and rage takes over. A demon's rage becomes overwhelming, and his strength increases tenfold. Relief comes from either lashing out violently, or sexual release.

With training, it could be a useful tool in battle. But outside of the battlefield, a demon on the Edge, with no focus to unleash his rage, was the most dangerous creature in the universe.

Marik knew that feeling—had been to the Edge himself—and knew he needed to calm the situation.

Moving to the food counter, he cut a slice of his most tender meat of the day and set it on a small plate in front of Analia. “Try this and tell me what you think.”

Picking up the morsel, she smelled it first, analyzing the scent. Then she took a small bite and chewed methodically. After swallowing, her features turned delightful. “Mmm, that tastes good. But I think the thing I had this morning is still my favorite.” She smiled wide at Sebastian.

Sebastian eased a bit, but was still close to the Edge.

Marik chose a soup dish next and offered it to Analia. Instead of taking the spoon he held out for her, she held the bowl to her lips and took a small sip.

“Mmm. Remarkable. What other kinds of foods are there?”

Marik caught himself laughing. Actually laughing. Abruptly, he stopped himself. Then he got a wicked idea. He went to his storage cooler and emerged with a covered dish. “I’d like to conduct a little experiment if you don’t mind.” Marik winked at Sebastian, who raised an eyebrow. He presented the dish to Analia and lifted the lid.

Sebastian snorted, and ran a hand down his face.

Analia was not oblivious of their exchange and warily took an item from the platter.

Analia was worried. They had acted strangely about this last pile of food. Where Sebastian was brooding, he now had a slight curl to his lips. Marik too was hiding a grin.

When Marik had admitted to being a slave, she had seen the truth of it in his eyes. She was stunned by the information, but it gave her new hope. Hope for the very real possibility of living free.

The small, brown, pebbled mound of food didn't look appetizing or impressive in any way. But she didn't want to be rude and refuse. Plus the boys were now watching her with such interest, so she popped one piece into her mouth.

She didn't chew at first, cautiously testing the flavor. The item began to soften to the shape of her mouth and her taste buds were inundated by rich, intense, flavor. The silky smooth texture caressed her tongue, as the sweetness rippled against her taste buds. Nothing could taste as good as this. Savoring the decadent new food, she let it sit, melting and coursing through her mouth, pressing it between her tongue and roof, before finally it dissolved into a warm liquid puddle and slid down her throat. The loss of it left her craving more.

Hearing the soft chuckles of both men, she opened her eyes. She hadn't even realized she had closed them.

"No matter the species, every woman loves chocolate." Marik laughed.

Their wide grins made her smile too. Sebastian had softened completely, looking more relaxed than before, his features more handsome than ever. It made her imagine what he might taste like, she licked her lips. His gaze caught the movement and, though his smile slowly fell, his eyes became heated.

"Your eyes are turning color," he said.

Turning color?

His statement brought her back to her senses. "What do you mean?"

He continued his intense gaze, the honey gold of his eyes melting, oozing with unspoken promises. She shivered. He shook his head. "They're normal again, but they almost looked silver a second ago."

"I saw it too," Marik said. "When she was looking at you."

Analia didn't know what they were talking about. Her eyes don't change colors. *Do they?*

"It could be a trait of her kind." Marik turned to her. "Is that true?"

“I don't know of my kind. As far as I know, I'm all that's left.” The thought that she might be the last of her people always saddened her. “My mother died when I was still young and after that...” she trailed off. “I was alone after that.”

Marik gave her a look of compassion. “This is not important now. We have work to get to, and, as it seems, I have a lot of training to do.” He nodded his dismissal to Sebastian. Analia was slightly shocked at that. *The captain being dismissed by the cook?* But Sebastian merely nodded in return, and turned to leave without another word or look in her direction. Her heart sank slightly as he disappeared. Why? She didn't know. What was she expecting? A, “good luck” or “don't screw this up” maybe. Was she disappointed?

“Do you like to be called Anya or Analia?” Marik asked.

Analia gave pause. She didn't dislike it when Sebastian called her Anya. It made her feel more connected in some way to her new life. A new name for a fresh start, perhaps. But her mother, or possibly her father, had given her the name Analia.

“Either is fine,” she said.

Marik started by showing her how to wash a dish. It wasn't difficult to catch on. Wash in warm water with soap, rinse, let dry. Easy.

Leaving her to it, he walked to the other side of the galley to begin cooking. Analia washed every dish till it gleamed. The work was satisfying even though her hands were becoming pruned. As she scrubbed, she could hear people ordering through the large countertop window that connected the salon with the galley. She wanted to peek around her corner by the sink to see all the new faces, but resisted the urge.

When she finished all the dishes, she waited for Marik's approval. Randomly, he picked up and examined many dishes—looking for mistakes, she assumed. Finally, he commended her work, and then led her around the rest of the galley.

He showed her the walk-in cooler where the perishable foods were kept, the walk-in cupboard where canned and dried foods lined the shelves, and the cooking area where she was never to go near unless he told her otherwise. Analia clung to his every word, not wanting to make a mistake.

Just then someone yelled across the counter for something called rake stew. Marik cringed. “The one thing I can't stand is being ordered at,” he commented for her ears only, while filling a bowl with a chunky liquid that tingled deliciously in Analia's nostrils. He handed the bowl to the man who had ordered it and came back to her with a smile playing on his lips. “That's why you are about to start your real job.”

Analia looked at him sideways.

“When someone comes in, you're going to go out there and take their order, then bring it back to me. I'll cook it and plate it, and you'll bring it to them. Can you do that?”

It sounded simple enough and the thought of being able to meet people up close, talk with them, was exhilarating. “I can do that.”

He shooed her towards the door. “Go on then.”

With a little too much excitement, she walked through the door that led to the salon. Most of the tables were empty. The man who had just ordered a moment ago sat alone at a table in the corner. There was one table that was occupied by three people, a woman and two males. At another table there were only two males.

Their dress was distinctly individual and their races varied to the extreme. Neither table seemed to have placed an order yet. Analia approached the table of three.

The female had short spiky brown hair and a small frame. Near her hairline started an intricate deep blue tattoo that swirled in a tight pattern, growing larger and gradating to green, as it traveled along her hairline and down her neck, disappearing where her clothing hugged her shoulders. Her

dress was a deep blue that hugged her body past her ankles where a pair of black open-toe shoes peeked out.

Both men were blond, handsome in different ways, and dressed in a similar type of clothes. Tan button-down shirts with dark brown pants and heavy black shoes—A uniform, perhaps, to identify their jobs.

None of them featured the horns that Sebastian, Marik, and Sonya did. Out of habit Analia looked at their ears—constantly seeking her own kind. They were nothing like her pointed ones.

She fought her usual twinge of disappointment.

It wasn't until they noticed her approach that they stopped their conversation and looked her way. Her nerves caught up with her. She had no idea what she was doing, and almost forgot why she had approached them to begin with. Marik said to take their order, so she would start with that.

“Hi, my name is Analia.” Her voice only slightly quivered. “May I take your orders?”

All eyebrows rose as they gaped at her. The two men at the other table stopped talking and focused on her as well. She tried to smile, but was sure it looked forced.

Finally, one of the males spoke. “Hi Analia, I'm Xandar. You're that girl, aren't you? That stowaway?”

“I am.”

“You're cute,” he stated.

The other two let out a short laugh.

Analia tried not to blush and kept her face blank. “Thank you.”

“You're working for Marik?”

She nodded.

“Don't let him boss you around too much. He can be a tight ass.”

She didn't know what to say to that, so she focused on her job instead. “Are you ready to order or should I come back?”

Xandar's gaze didn't waver; his staring started to become uncomfortable. She told herself it was because being stared at was entirely new to her.

Xandar leaned back in his chair and openly studied her from head to toe. "Technically, you're not part of the crew, are you?"

"No," she offered. "I'm not. I'll be leaving the ship once the current commission is completed."

"So, that means you're not against the rules."

The women snorted and spoke with a strange accent that Analia had never heard before. "As if you follow the rules, anyway. Leave the poor girl alone and just order already. Little Analia, I'll have the shroomeak salad."

Analia nodded and turned her attention to the other male who hadn't yet spoken.

"Rake stew," he said.

She then focused on Xandar, who was still looking at her like she was on the menu.

Finally, he spoke. "I'll do the rake stew as well."

She nodded and turned away, walking to the other table to take their orders. The two men were both dusted with black stains on their clothing and skin. Analia decided that, by their messed appearance, they must be mechanics or work closely with the engines of the ship.

One man had an upturned nose and a set of long thin horns, nestled just behind ears that rose slightly above his bald head. They were nothing like Sebastian's short stubby horns. The man's demeanor would look menacing, if it wasn't for his kind eyes. The other person seemed to be made of wrinkles. His face, arms and neck, even his eyelids had wrinkles on them, though it didn't make him look old.

Both ordered rake stew. Analia reentered the galley to relay the orders to Marik, then asked, "What is rake stew?"

“It's made up of whatever meats I have available when I begin to make it, combined with vegetables and my own special blend of spices. I slow cooks it for three days before it is ready to be served. It just went on the menu this morning, so you'll be getting a lot of orders for it.”

Marik was right. Most orders throughout the day were for rake stew. With every table, she grew more and more comfortable in her new position, and began to approach each with confidence.

The questions aimed at her were the same. Where did you come from? Why did you sneak onto the ship? Where are you headed next? What species are you? She tactfully dodged the difficult questions and really didn't know how to answer the last two.

As she served the crew, she also observed them. They were all so contrary from one another. Completely different species sitting together, laughing and talking as though there were no disparity between them.

A man with thin tentacles cascading from his neck sat across from a woman with four eyes. At another table, a woman with red skin shared stories with two women with larger than normal eyes that seemed to glow multicolored.

She also noticed how happy they all seemed. Everyone smiled at her and were mostly polite. The atmosphere was easy going and relaxed. There was a comforting energy all around.

Maybe she didn't need to find her own kind. Maybe there was a place for her, like this, where different species lived in peace together. Perhaps there was a place for her on this very ship. What if she could stay?

The thought was heady. After only a day of mingling with the crew, she had allowed herself to feel like one of them. Even though she knew she would never be like them, not really. Not with her ability, ever present and threatening her peace. But if she could keep it hidden, buried, there would be no reason for any of them to covet it.

Two more females entered. They looked young. Teenagers maybe. One looked similar to the woman with the intricate tattoo. She had the same swirl pattern that framed her face, only hers varied in color from oranges to yellows and deep reds. Analia thought it looked beautiful.

The other girl had brilliant blue hair that cut off just above the shoulders, and her skin was a silky pale color. They stood for a moment, surveying the room that had filled rapidly with patrons, until one had spotted her and pointed for the other. On the tips of their toes, they tried to get a better look at Analia, before grabbing a table near where they entered.

Analia weaved through the crowded room to reach them. They whispered into each other's ear as she came close. "Hi," Analia said, and introduced herself for the thousandth time that day. Then came the questions in such hurried rushes, that she didn't have time to respond.

She looked around the room and pondered the crowd. Many faces would glance in her direction, then quickly turn away. Hushed whispers filled the room. It seemed all were focused on her in some way. She was a curiosity of sorts, Analia realized.

She almost laughed out loud. After so many years in isolation, she felt crowded. The feeling was so foreign to her, she reveled in it.

Turning back to the girls, she tried to answer them adequately. Nearby conversations died down to listen in. The teens' questions continued to flow from them like water. She was beginning to enjoy the enthusiastic interrogation, while still skillfully evading certain inquiries. Then she asked a few of her own, wanting to know everything about the people on the ship.

"How long have the two of you lived here?"

The one with the pattern-etched skin spoke first. "I was born on this ship. My mother works in the plant nursery."

"Do you like it here?"

“Yeah, it's okay.” She shrugged.

The other girl was eager. “I wasn't born here, but I've been here for five years. My dad is one of the engineers,” she said proudly. “Have you seen the ship? There are lots of things to do here. Before me and my dad came here, we were on a ship that didn't have anything. It was so boring.”

“Sebastian showed me around a little.”

They both sniggered at that. “He's so cute,” blue hair said.

“I like Calic better.” The other blushed slightly. “By the way, my name is Spectra.” She then pointed to the blue-haired girl. “And this is Edenya.”

“I'm glad to meet you both. So, are you hungry or did you just come in to interrogate me?” After taking their orders, Analia walked back into the galley. A few plates of food had piled up, and she hurried them out to the tables.

When she returned, Marik asked how she was handling everything.

“I think I'm getting the hang of it.”

“They seem to be coming in by the dozen,” he said. “This is an unusual crowd for this time of day. I think they're all here to see you, Anya.”

She nodded in agreement. “I think so too.”

“Are you feeling overwhelmed? You can call it a day if you want to go back to your room.”

“Thanks, but I'll stay. It is overwhelming, but it's also a relief,” she said, while gathering more plates.

If she worked really hard, maybe she could convince Sebastian to let her stay.

CHAPTER 7



*F*uck.

How could she have been a slave? It couldn't be possible. However, it did explain her appearance when he'd found her. And her timidness. The thought had briefly occurred to Sebastian then, but her beauty quickly scraped it away. He had instantly dismissed it as a possibility for such a stunning creature. The idea of her being a slave made his gut retch.

His bad mood was obvious to everyone within close proximity. The halls parted as he passed and after he entered the control room, the silent tension grew as thick as a fog. For the crew, total avoidance was the game. Keeping out of thrashing distance and avoiding a demon's rage was key to survival.

Usually Sebastian was slow to anger, but when it did happen, it was difficult to calm him. It was like a flood gate opened.

Only Calic remained undaunted by his angry demeanor. In fact, he often enjoyed provoking Sebastian for his own sadistic amusement.

Calic was watching him now. Smugness painted his features as he enjoyed Sebastian's loss of control. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" Cale barked.

Sebastian growled and fought the urge to introduce Cale's face to his fist. Cale noted the gleam in Sebastian's eye and it only drove him on. Some of the crew shook their heads at Cale in warning, who either didn't notice or chose to ignore them.

"What?" Cale continued his baiting. "Looking to take it out on someone, yeah? I'm game, we can spar right here. I haven't had a good crack from you in years. Starting to think you're going soft big brother."

Quick as lightning, Sebastian whipped his arm out and snaked his hand around Cale's neck, squeezing tight to hold him in place. Cale just smiled and allowed the contact, though Sebastian knew he could easily squirm out of his hold.

Hazily, Sebastian realized Cale was allowing him to take out his rage and wouldn't retaliate if Sebastian decided to beat the living shit out of him right now...well not at first anyway. Cale always loved a good fight.

Sebastian softened his grip. And, after a moment of contemplation, he let go. Though he really would like to take out his rage on someone, he should be able to control his baser instincts.

Cale gave his trademark arrogant laugh and muttered, "Soft," under his breath, still posturing for a fight. "Better watch out, you were almost about to act like a demon."

Ignoring Cale, Sebastian returned to his brooding.

Analia was an escaped slave who admittedly knew nothing of cooking, cleaning, or serving. Fists clenched, the dark recesses of his mind knew all too well what a slaver would want from her. His stomach retched as the thought pushed him closer to the Edge.

Then his stomach tightened even more as the memory of last night crept its way into his mind. The way he'd behaved toward her, nearly attacking her. He'd almost taken her out of mindless lust. She had asked him to stop with such fear in her voice. He remembered her body shaking

with it. No wonder she was so frightened of him. He'd acted, as many races expected of his kind, like a monster.

Now more than ever he needed to stay away from her. Every time Analia came near him, he was compelled to touch her, to stay near her, to taste her. Even now, during one of his worst rages since the war, he felt the need to go to her for relief.

As if she would accept him after the way he'd treated her. His demon instincts were compelling him to not only go to her, but to protect her. That was laughable. She would need protection from him.

Keeping away from her was one way of protecting her, but what of the other males on the ship? The thought drove his fury.

Right now, it was a very good thing she hadn't told him where she'd come from, because all he wanted to do was forget the contract with the Serakians, find the person who had hurt her, and rip him to bloody shreds. Screw the wards!

If he didn't release this rage somehow, he knew he would do something he'd regret.

“Cale!” Sebastian barked his name like an order.

Calic recognized the tone in Sebastian's voice and smiled with malevolence. “Let's do this.”

Sebastian was barely able to make it to the sparring room, without knocking Cale's head off. A number of practice weapons lined the walls, but for this, he wanted to use his body as the weapon.

Cale positioned himself across from Sebastian in his natural fighting stance. It was a deceiving stance, making Cale look too relaxed and unprepared for a fight. But when an enemy would attack, thinking to catch him off guard, Cale would strike with almost invisible speed. Sebastian knew this well, had seen him in action, and wanted the full force of it.

Without a sign that the battle had begun, Sebastian lunged. Calic was quick, but so was he. Sebastian caught him in the jaw. Without missing a

beat, Cale lashed out with a kick to the gut and, in a twisting move, a hard elbow to the ear. Sebastian hardly felt it through the festering wrath inside him. His fangs descended as his mind ventured closer to the Edge. He countered with a bashing punch to Cale's abdomen. Cale stumbled back, but quickly regaining balance, he kicked wide, pounding Sebastian in the chest.

Although Sebastian could have dodged the move, he didn't. It was as if he needed the pain to calm him in some way. He was closer to the Edge than he'd been in decades, and below the muddiness of his mind he knew his own crew was in danger from him if he couldn't regain control.

Either fighting or sex helped to focus a demon until the madness eased. It was either fight Cale or go to Analia. His instincts said Anya. But he knew if he went to her now, he would hurt her. With Sebastian lost to rage and lust, she wouldn't survive it, even if she wanted him, which she didn't.

Cale was the perfect opponent. He understood a demon's rage, having been to the Edge himself a number of times. Cale especially understood Sebastian. If the situation were reversed—as it had been in the past, many times over—Sebastian would be doing the same for him.

Another hard hit to Sebastian's skull, followed by two swift punches to his gut, and a move from Cale that took his legs out from under him. His body slammed into the mat.

The boy was fast. Sebastian felt a twinge of pride slice through his rage.

Sebastian darted out of the way just before Cale's elbow landed on his windpipe. Both of them on the ground, Sebastian kicked out, booting Cale in the stomach, and then flipped to his feet.

Cale laughed, coming to his feet as well. "It's about time I got a good fight out of you!"

With a smile on his face, Cale lunged again, faking a punch. Spinning his body, he maneuvered behind Sebastian, grabbing him in a chokehold,

and landing a barrage of punches and kicks to his body.

Sebastian rolled Cale over his back and flipped his own body so that he landed hard on top of Cale, his elbow connecting with Cale's chest.

Cale's breath rushed out of him, but he pushed away quickly. Staying low to the ground, he spun his leg out, landing another perfect kick to Sebastian's skull, whipping his head to the side as blood fanned out from a fresh cut.

They went on like this until both were panting and exhausted, bodies pressed wearily to the mat. Sebastian's storm of fury had abated.

After a long while of catching their breaths Calic was the first to speak. "What the fuck happened to you?"

Sebastian swallowed hard and told him everything that had occurred between Analia and himself.

Cale laughed without humor. "I have to meet the chit that's got you so worked up. You of all people!"

"What do you mean me of all people?"

Cale rolled his eyes. "I've seen you with women. You don't give a fuck about their pasts or their futures, either before or after you've slept with them. You don't care about any woman."

"Neither do you."

Cale was silent for a moment. "No arguments there."

"I care about Sonya," Sebastian retorted.

"As do I, but she's different. She's family."—pause—"The trustworthy kind. She doesn't count. What's more, you lose interest in any woman who has ever set foot on this ship, but this woman is under your skin in a bad way. Why?"

Shaking his head. "I don't know."

"Well, I'm curious. I have to see this girl." He gave Sebastian a mischievous smile. "Hungry?"

"I've vowed to stay away from her, remember?"

“Be realistic. No one can stay away from anyone on this ship. Let's go.”

Calic couldn't wait to see this. Sebastian was never affected by a woman. He'd taken the betrayal of their mother and Velicia almost worse than he did. As a result, Sebastian kept himself clear of women, only taking a woman to his bed when he absolutely needed to, and never on the ship.

Luckily, Cale didn't have that problem. He enjoyed sex more than ever, of course, rarely with the same woman. He had sampled many on the ship without getting attached. Though none compared to his Velicia, his mate. The memory of her filled him with regret, but he quickly stamped it down.

Cale was wary of the stowaway who had unwittingly driven Sebastian to the Edge. She was of questionable background, and her intentions unknown. Cale had to assess the situation firsthand, to figure out if he needed to protect Sebastian from her or the other way around. She could be nothing more than a spy, sent by one of their countless competitors. He would meet her and make his judgment before voicing his opinion to Sebastian, but it was a very likely scenario.

They entered the salon and chose a table in the corner, overlooking most of the room.

Sebastian's eyes went wild when he spotted her. She was conversing easily with a table of men. Some of them were known for their treatment of women, not so different from Sebastian and himself. A low growl reverberated from deep within Sebastian. He looked as though he was fighting the urge to get between them and make his claim on her known. It was how Cale would have acted, had acted, with his own mate before he had claimed her as his.

It hurt now to remember the love he had for Velicia before she callously betrayed them to their enemy. Even with her betrayal, he missed

her deeply: her touch, her taste, her hands on his body, and her soft cries in his ear as he drove into her. He had loved her completely, would have done anything for her. Pain spiked in him and he looked at Sebastian. Surely it wasn't as serious as that. Sebastian couldn't be so stupid as to want to claim the chit as his only mate.

Cale studied her. Her movements screamed innocence. Sonya had obviously provided the wardrobe. The girl gave a nervous laugh, and the table of men joined in. As she strolled back into the galley, Cale noticed many eyes in the room lingered on her. He was surprised to find even *he* was getting the urge to protect her, if only for the sake of Sebastian's sanity.

When she once again exited the galley, she spotted Sebastian. Her face lit up as she hurried over to take their order. Sebastian gripped the table.

“Hi, Sebastian! I mean, Captain.” Her smile was radiant and blazing in Sebastian’s direction. Then she turned to Cale, obviously scrutinizing his horns. A little smaller and lighter in color than Sebastian's, they almost blended in with Cale's blond spikes of hair. “Hi, I'm Analia.” She introduced herself and reached out her hand.

“Calic.” He took her hand, admiring her bravery when she was obviously timid. There were not many who would willingly offer a body part to a demon. Perhaps she was truly as naive as Sebastian claimed. Either that, or she was a very good actress.

“How do you like the job?” Sebastian asked.

She nearly bounced with her words. “It's great. I must have met everyone on the ship by now. Marik says they're curious about me, though I don't know why they would be. There are so many different races here, I'm overwhelmed at learning them all. Many of them offered to show me more of the ship, but I told them I'd have to check with you first.”

Cale waited for Sebastian's ire, but he kept himself in check.

“You don't need to check with me. In fact, you won't be seeing much of me from now on. I have a lot of responsibilities to attend to. If you need anything, go to Marik or Sonya, or even Cale if they are not available.” Cale scoffed at that, and Sebastian shot him a warning look. “Cale will be more than happy to assist you.”

Analia's face fell. “Okay,” she muttered.

Uh oh.

Could she be as affected by Sebastian as he was by her? By the way Sebastian had spoken, one would think she should be happy not to see him again. When Sebastian got up to leave, her breath caught.

“Are you not staying to eat?”

“No, I'll eat later.”

“But there's rake stew. Marik says it will be gone by today. He made me try it, it's very good. Almost one of the best things I've tasted so far.”

Sebastian laughed at that and reluctantly settled back in his chair. “Sure, I can't pass up rake stew.”

She smiled again. “You too, Calic?”

“Sure, why not.”

Analia rushed back to the galley and returned with two piping hot bowls. By the rich aroma, Cale could tell Marik had used a good stock of meat this time. He dug in immediately. Sebastian thanked Analia and watched her as she attended the other tables. In turn she would periodically glance his way, turning away quickly if she caught his gaze.

“I'm going to need to get a mop for all the drool in here.” Cale got Sebastian's attention with that. He tried, and failed, to hide a guilty smirk. “I see why you would want to stay away. A beautiful woman who wants to be near you? Bleck.”

“She doesn't want...”

“Yes, she does,” Cale interrupted. “I've seen that look in a woman's eyes before...many in fact. She wants you too.”

“I don't want...”

“Yes. You do.”

Sebastian shook his head, but didn't try to deny it again.

“I think you should just take her.”

He looked at Cale with a warning in his eyes. “No.”

“Get her out of your system,” he drawled. “Once you've had her, you'll be over her. Problem solved.”

Sebastian glanced toward Analia and his posture became rigid, horns darkening with malice. Cale looked and saw a male fingering the material of her skirt. Analia politely dodged out of reach.

He focused back on Sebastian and snapped his fingers to gain his attention. “Then there would be no more of that.” He raised an eyebrow at Sebastian's show of fangs.

Sebastian visibly struggled to regain his calm. “I couldn't. She's probably been treated badly her whole life. I wouldn't feel right about using her like that.”

Cale looked at him like he was crazy. “Do you...you don't care for her? Do you?” He noted the revulsion in his own voice.

“Of course not!”

“Good, because you don't even know this girl. She could be a spy.”

Analia, carrying a load of dishes, teetered off balance and nearly dropped the pile. She gathered her balance before disappearing into the galley.

“A very convincing spy.”

“You're right, all the more reason to stay away from her. I'm out of here. If she comes to you, I'd appreciate it if you tried to help her, and be nice. And Cale...I don't have to tell you not to touch her.”

“Are you kidding? I wouldn't touch her with a ten foot pole.” Lie. If she wasn't making Sebastian crazed, she was just the kind of girl he would

attempt, but he scoffed at the idea of getting attached as clearly as Sebastian was.

Sebastian left the room without a backward glance.

The disappointment on Analia's face when she saw that Sebastian had gone seemed to flood the room with its energy, almost pulling sympathy from Cale. He didn't like that. As Cale left the salon, he caught Marik's eye and they shared a look.

So, Marik was aware of the situation as well.

Finishing out the day, Analia helped Marik clean up the galley and salon. Cleaning turned out to be as simple as washing the dishes or waiting the tables, though not as fun.

As she wiped the counters, she allowed her mind to drift through her day. A single day had been filled with more amusement than the whole of her entire life. Understanding flooded her at how much she'd been missing, solidifying her determination to keep her freedom. She vowed to work harder to prove her worth so she could petition to stay aboard the ship and become part of the crew.

When Sebastian had appeared in the salon, she used it as her chance to show how competent she was with her new position and how quickly she performed her tasks. She made sure to keep as busy as possible, hoping he was watching. Then she had noticed he was watching, intensely so. Flushing, she had become distracted by him. She'd struggled not to notice his eyes on her. It had made her self-conscious about her every move.

One time during the evening Calic had whispered something to him, and he raked her with a look that stopped her in her tracks and almost sent a large pile of dishes crashing to the floor. It was the same look he gave her last night, and it had made her entire body shudder.

“Hi ya.” Sonya was suddenly in front of her. Analia hadn't even heard her enter the room. “You almost finished here?” She jumped up and planted herself on the counter where Analia had just finished cleaning. Her legs swung leisurely off the ledge.

“I still have some cleaning to do, but I believe I'll be finished soon.”

“Marik?” Sonya yelled through the window.

“Take her. I'll finish up here.”

Analia protested, “No, I can finish.”

“Go on, Anya. You did well today. I'll see you tomorrow.”

Sonya didn't wait for her reply before she hopped off the counter and pulled her toward the exit. “I have a surprise for you,” she practically sang.

“A surprise?” Analia noted the casual way Sonya gripped her hand, and smiled back at her as she continued leading her down the hall.

“I've been hunting all day long for you. I was tempted to keep some for myself.” She flipped her hair dramatically and sighed. “You're lucky I'm the generous type.”

“I have no idea what you're taking about.” Analia almost laughed at the playfully wicked look Sonya gave her.

“We're here.” They stopped in front of Analia's room. “Well? Go in.”

Tentatively, Analia stepped inside, not sure what to expect. All around the room, clothes were draped over the couch, the bed, tables and chairs. “What's this?”

“Your new wardrobe.” Sonya smiled and clapped her hands together as if it was the most amazing sight, and for Analia, it was.

Her gaze rolled over the room, taking in the clothing of all shapes and colors. She had never had a wardrobe before. The only clothing Darius allowed her were tatter rags, not even fit for cleaning with. Biting back tears, Analia looked at Sonya, the muscles in her throat tightening as she fought the overwhelming emotion, unable to speak her gratitude.

“Stop that,” Sonya scolded. “You're going to get me going. Go. Go play with your new toys.”

As Sonya watched, Analia browsed the collection, feeling the materials. Some were softer than others, and she couldn't wait to wear them. Her outfit for the morning was already chosen before she finished browsing through every item.

“It's not the best. It's only what people were willing to part with, but I was able to get you some pretty nice stuff. Don't you think?”

“Thank you, Sonya. But this is too much, I think. I'm leaving the ship after the delivery.” Though Analia secretly hoped otherwise.

“You'll still need clothes after you leave us, won't you? Lesson number one, you can never have enough clothing.” With sly movements and a wicked grin, Sonya slinked farther into the room. “Lesson number two? Shoes!” She opened a closet to reveal a small pile of footwear.

Anya moved to get a better view. Some were flat and some were spiked at the heel like Sonya's. Though they were beautiful, Analia found herself wondering how you'd walk in them.

Sonya must have seen her reservation. “Have you ever worn heels before?”

Analia shook her head.

“Ooh. This will be fun. Try them on, and let me see your walk.” Sonya plopped onto the couch expectantly.

Discarding her flats, Analia strapped on one of the scarier pair. She was surprised at how balanced you had to be in order to stay upright.

After stumbling many times, and hearing Sonya's giggles of delight, Analia asked, “Why do you go through this trouble?”

“Because, they look great!” she said, as though the question was a silly one.

“Oh.”

“Keep trying, you'll get it.” Sonya stood and gave her a slow demonstration. Analia followed her example, and after many attempts, was able to walk across the room with only one slip.

Even though she seemed to thoroughly enjoy Analia's every falter—every one of Sonya's howls and giggles drew a laugh from Analia as well—Sonya applauded Analia's mild triumph. “Very nice, now try another pair.”

This time, she chose a smaller heel, which was much easier, but still trying. She made it across the room with no slips, and smiled at her own success. This pair would go perfect with her outfit tomorrow.

Sonya turned serious. Analia could tell something was on her mind, and was sure she was about to be questioned, again, but asked anyway. “What is it?”

“I heard something about you, that you were a slave. Is it true?”

Analia merely nodded in confirmation.

“For how long?”

“Almost all my life. I was a child when my mother died. I don't remember exactly how old I was, or my true age now, but I estimate it has been about two hundred years.”

“I'm sorry. I can't imagine what that would be like. Marik was a slave, did he tell you?”

“Yes.”

“When we saved him, he was wild. Almost mad, from what they did to him. You seem to be more stable. But then, demons don't do well in captivity. We are ruled by emotions that border on the extreme. Happy, sad, or angry we feel them very strongly. Perhaps your kind has more control over themselves.”

“I'm not sure. Maybe. There were many times I thought I would go mad. There was a time when I think I was mad. My mind would invent hallucinations.”

At times, she would see a ghost of a man. The same man each time. He was older, and reminded her of something, or someone, she couldn't quite remember. She imagined he had ears like hers and kind eyes. She figured it was a way for her mind to cope with the long periods of isolation.

“For some reason, I would always come back from the brink of insanity. I don't know why or how, I just did. And then I was myself once more. I remember feeling that there was something more for me. That eventually, I would be free. I guess that kept me sane.” What Analia didn't say was that the hallucination would tell her these things. He would tell her he could sense her future and assured her that she would be okay.

Even though she knew he wasn't real, Analia always kept him in the back of her mind, for strength.

“So, you don't know how old you are?”

“No.”

“When is your birthday?”

“I don't remember. Like I said, I was very young when my mother died.”

“Were you enslaved because she died?”

“Yes and no. I remember we were running from something, something from my home planet, I think.” Analia's brows drew together as she tried to remember. She hadn't thought of her mother, or the events that wove her fate for so long.

“Get her out of here, keep her safe,” someone had yelled.

The memory almost surfaced. “When we approached a large ship, I remember my mother seemed to grow upset. She was yelling at someone, the pilot maybe. I just looked out the window as we began to dock. The ship became our home. We hadn't been there very long before my mother passed away.”

Darius had told her it was suicide. She believed him, at first, when she was only a child. But now she had no doubt that Darius was behind the

death.

“After that, I belonged to...” Analia trailed off. She had almost given a name. *Stupid*. “I was a slave from that point on.” She remembered the first time Darius hooked her up to the ship, drawing out her energy in excruciating waves. She thought she would die from the pain of it.

Sonya, now visibly saddened by her story, slumped on the couch. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m glad that you’re free now. May your life be filled with happiness from now till the end.”

Analia tried to shrug off the sense of foreboding that flooded her. Darius could still find her. She realized she couldn’t stay on *Marada*, as she’d been wishing all day. Eventually, he would come looking for her. Not only would he find her and claim her once more, but—and it only occurred to her now—the people on this ship were in danger, because of her.

Extarga was powerful, even without Analia there to give it life. Darius honed it as a weapon of destruction. Sebastian’s ship was substantial, and she could feel its strength, but it would never stand a chance against *Extarga*. Darius would rip through *Marada* as if it were made of paper.

Analia was intrigued by the feelings Sebastian brought out in her and was grateful that he was helping her. Unfortunately, the only way she could see to repay his kindness, was to get as far away from him, and *Marada*, as possible, before Darius realized Sebastian was aiding her.

The loneliness that had been curbed by today’s events came crashing back on her with the weight of a steel cage.

As soon as Sonya left for the night, Analia showered, lingering under the new luxury of fresh, warm water. A bout of anticipation hit her as she exited the bathing chamber, and then, strangely enough, disappointment, when she found herself alone.

She curled up on the couch, evaluating her feelings.

The surge of anticipation had startled her. The disappointment alarmed her. Did she *want* Sebastian to be here waiting for her? Looking at her the way he had in the salon, or the night before? That couldn't be what she wanted.

Sebastian was more handsome than any male she'd ever seen, with eyes that glowed gold and hair as black as space and enticing horns that faded from deep magenta at the base to black at the tip. She imagined what they might feel like. Were they hard? Warm like his skin? Or cool to the touch?

He seemed to be bringing out unfamiliar desires in her. At the thought of him, her body grew warm and ached with need. What might he have done if she had embraced him the night before?

What was wrong with her?

It was a good thing she wasn't staying on this ship, with a male that had such a strong effect on her. Every time Sebastian came near her, the attraction grew stronger. With her strange desire, it was possible he could obtain more control over her than Darius ever had. The thought sobered her, and she quelled her silly fantasies.

She would take command of herself from this point on. Besides, as he'd said, she wouldn't be seeing much of him anyway. She told herself she was glad about that. That she would be so busy herself she would have no time to think of him. She made herself say it over and over again until she believed the convenient lie.

“Dammit, Anya!”

Analía's body jerked awake, but she kept her eyes closed and clutched the covers to her chin. Sebastian was here again, and angry that she hadn't heeded his order to use the bed he'd provided for her.

She peeked through squinted eyes.

As she suspected, he was enraged. And he seemed to be waiting for an explanation. He wore a deep blue short sleeved shirt that revealed his muscular arms, crossed over his chest, and black pants that seemed to have been made to fit him perfectly. His hair was tousled in a way that made him look sexy and dangerous at the same time.

Fighting her body's reaction to him, she felt her nipples grow hard, and that aching need from last night was slowly returning.

She hadn't expected him to show up after his declaration about being too busy to deal with her. She'd believed it so much that she dared to wear one of the smaller sleeping gowns, with the softest material she'd ever felt. Unfortunately, it hugged her body and clung to her curves. Not good. She needed him to stay in control of himself so she could do the same, and she had the feeling that her tiny outfit would thwart them both.

Why was he here, anyway? To make sure she was obeying his orders? Her blood boiled at the thought. Did he think he was her new master? She was done being controlled by males!

"Why are you sleeping on the couch again? I told you to use the bed. I had it brought in for your comfort, and you will use it."

His arrogant, commanding tone irritated the desire right out of her. The affront that he could order her around, as though she were part of his crew—when he'd made it crystal clear that she wasn't—snapped something inside her. Violently throwing the covers aside, she stood on the couch to match his height and challenged him with a steady gaze.

Fists clenched. "I'm done taking orders Sebastian! I'm free of that. I'll sleep where I want, when I want, and I don't have to explain myself to you."

If you don't like it, then you can do what you originally promised to do and throw me out into space. I'm not one of your crew, and I'm no one's slave!"

Sebastian's jaw had dropped halfway through her speech. His shocked eyes lowered to her breasts, and she became painfully aware once more of her scantily-clad nightgown she wore. Analia fought the urge to grab for the blanket and cover herself. She needed to stand her ground now, or lose both her confidence and the battle she may have just begun.

Sonya had said demons were ruled by strong emotions. She realized she was provoking him with both her body and her sharp tongue. She would have never done that to Darius. Couldn't even fathom the punishment he would have rendered at her outburst. Analia feared she was about to see a side of Sebastian that would forever change her view of him.

Sebastian dropped his folded arms and took an angry step toward her. Then he stopped a few feet away. Just when she'd begun to waver in her resolve, his lips curled slightly. She cursed her body for being affected once again by that tiny smile.

His eyes were still on her body when he spoke. "You're not a slave here, Anya. I don't want you for that." His piercing gaze flashed to her face. Her breath caught at the mingling of emotions she saw there. Anger, desire, sorrow, and back to anger. "You are, however, on my ship. Illegally, I might add. And as long as you're here, you will be treated as though you are under my command."

Analia set her jaw. His smile became mischievous, as though he were enjoying himself.

They stood that way for a moment, his arrogance against her newly found stubbornness. Then he said, "You need to get dressed." Crossing his arms again, he took a step back. "Now."

She crossed her arms over her chest, mimicking his stance. The action caused the material to stretch tighter across her breasts, and for a moment,

she regretted the move—until Sebastian's jaw clenched, and a slow, almost inaudible groan escaped him.

The sound caused the warmth in her to grow hotter, a throbbing pulse flowed through her, and her skin became super sensitive. She could feel every fiber of the soft material rubbing against her flesh. Her heart pounded against her rib cage making her breath hitch.

Like a statue, Sebastian froze. The only indication of his emotion was in his eyes. He explored her with his gaze, but it almost felt like a physical touch. As he perused her body, his muscles seemed to grow tighter, and a tic started in his jaw.

He dropped his arms, fists clenched, and took another step back, tearing away his gaze. “Get dressed,” he barked.

His tone made her jump, fear quickly replacing desire.

Thank the gods!

She grabbed the clothes she had selected the night before and rushed to the bathroom. The doors swooshed open at her approach and didn't close fast enough once she had entered.

When she was safely inside, she leaned wearily against the wall. What had just happened? Before meeting Sebastian, she had been docile, obedient, and tame. Now? Now she didn't know what she was.

Analia had expected Sebastian to lose control, as he had the night before. Somewhere inside her she thought maybe she had wanted him to, and she scolded herself for it. But he was nothing like before.

Perhaps, now that he knew she'd been a slave, his opinion of her had dropped. The thought should have made her glad, but it didn't.

As Analia dressed, she once again thought over her new life and how she was already so changed by it. She found that she liked the racing of her heart when it was caused by something other than punishment. She had loved the unpredictability of the day before. Even a moment ago with Sebastian had been exciting, as well as frightening.

For the first time in her life, she was eager for more.

The moment Anya entered the bathing chamber, Sebastian ran out of there like some sort of deviant. He'd been foolish to come here this morning. Selfish and foolish! Making sure she was following his orders had been just an excuse he had branded into his mind, to allow himself to see her. Deep down he knew there was another reason. He just hadn't wanted to admit it.

She'd insinuated that he was treating her like a slave. Preposterous! Now that he was well away from her and her delirious scent, he could muster up the proper amount of anger at the accusation. If he was treating her as a slave, would she have such luxurious accommodations? Or almost free rein of the ship? All the food she could eat? Sebastian seethed. He craved her comfort, is all. Again this morning she had looked as though she had only slept a few hours through the night.

The couch was old and overused. The cushions no longer plush. He hadn't given much thought to the thing at the time the room had been prepared for her. His main concern had been finding a comfortable enough bed. He had become furious when he saw that she was again refusing to use it.

Then the chit had stood, revealing herself to him, and his brain had gone dead. Her sleeping garment was a deep maroon tight piece of fabric that cut off at her upper thigh and gripped her breasts the way that he wanted to. For a moment, he'd forgotten why he was there in the first place. *Something about a bed? Yes, that was the perfect thing for a moment like this.* Her lightly tussled blond hair spilled over her shoulders and framed her face in such a way as to make him imagine what she might look like after being thoroughly sated.

Her weight had sunk into the cushion, proving their inequity. She'd been attempting to raise her height to his, coming up short, and her stern face almost made him laugh from the sheer kitten-like fierceness.

Then she spoke, and it took a while before her words penetrated his thickly aroused skull. She was unhappy with his orders and had put her outrage into her tone. Her glare was fierce, with her iridescent blue eyes flashing to silver and back, and it made him want her all the more. His mouth watered, and his shaft strained against his pants.

Obviously, she had a strong spirit. A strength deep within her that maybe even she didn't know existed. Someone had tried very hard to stamp it out of her, and failed miserably.

And Sebastian wanted more.

For a long while, as she held her challenging gaze, he wrestled with his urge to rip away the flimsy fabric and replace it with his hands. He had imagined how soft and warm she would be, and when the scent of her desire hit him, he knew she would be wet for him.

His tongue craved a taste of her, wanting to lick her between her silky thighs until she came again and again. Then he would replace his tongue with his shaft and take her slow until they were both panting and sweating in ecstasy.

He shook himself and tried to clear his mind.

This was the reason he was supposed to stay away from her. And that's exactly what he would do. Right after he dealt with her little challenge.

CHAPTER 8



Analia entered Marik's galley, ready to start another day full of repetitive questions and uncomfortable stares. She started by putting away the clean dishes that were left overnight to dry.

Today, however, as she acclimated to the people on the ship, she became the one asking the questions. Analia was curious about everything and everyone and inquired about as many details she could think of, eating up the knowledge as quickly as possible. And every time she received an answer, it just spurred another line of questioning.

One of the many things she discovered was that most of the crew members originated on planets. Many different kinds of planets. And most of them left home in favor of a life in space. Why did they leave? Why come to space? Why a merchant ship? Why *this* merchant ship? She wanted to know everything.

When she asked people to describe their homes, she was surprised at the differences in animal and plant life. Each planet was unique in its own habitat. Analia was enthralled. It made her wonder what kind of animals had lived on her own home planet.

One person, his name was Kwal, told her he had come from a planet made up almost entirely of water, while another man claimed there was

nearly no water at all on his home world.

Someone told her a thrilling story of how he had once escaped a barveka plant, a plant that grew long tendrils, with a sticky substance that oozed from the ends for grabbing and holding nearby prey and for pulling whatever was caught into one of its many stomach chambers.

The man had carried no tools with him, yet had escaped by biting away the thick tendril that had snagged him. He admitted he couldn't taste right for a year after that. Analia was awed by the story and shuddered at the idea of being prey to a plant.

A man sitting close by heard the story and offered a similar tale of survival. A giant man-eating bird from his home planet had scooped him up from a field and deposited him in its huge nest to be food for its young. The man had to fight his way past the sharp squawking beaks to climb over the edge of the nest. With the crying babies above him, he climbed down from a very great height, worrying the whole time that the mother would return for him. He's despised birds of any size ever since.

Not too shortly after that, the eavesdropping crowd broke into a clamor of their own tales of survival and mishap, growing rowdy with excitement, each one trying to top the last with their fantastical stories.

Analia thought it was no wonder they all chose to come to space and leave their homes behind. The stories vacillated between horrific and fanciful. Analia couldn't get enough.

Though different in nature, there were many similarities between each planet she learned about. Suns warmed the atmospheres. Moons in orbit affected everything from ocean tides to animal behavior, and even the moods of the local inhabitants. Some claimed to have more than fifteen moons.

What a sight that would be.

All this talk gave Analia a spark of remembrance from her own planet: blue skies, two maybe three moons, a couple of vine-like plants on a white

marble balcony spilling over the edge. The memory became fuzzy.

She continued listening, enthralled by each story offered to her. She soaked up every description, wishing she could visit every planet in turn. In a way, she supposed she was searching. Searching for her own planet, or a planet she could call her own one day. She wasn't sure how far Sebastian was willing to travel to find a place to leave her. She feared he might just unload her with the cargo when they reached their destination.

Perhaps she should speak with him about it...once he calmed down about the couch incident, that is. Maybe there was a database of planets she could search through, to find something close by, so he wouldn't have to travel too far out of his way. That would be ideal.

What kind of planet would suit her? A place that was calm and warm. She dreamed of sun on her skin and vegetation that didn't try to eat you. Small, non-threatening flying creatures would be good too.

As the breakfast crowd thinned, she took the time to clean and dry the dishes, and wipe down the counters for the lunch hour. Methodically, she scoured the counters till they shined.

Marik often remained quiet while working the stoves. She suspected he liked it that way and normally tried not to bother him with conversation. But her curiosity got the better of her.

“Marik?”

He grunted in answer and didn't look up from the sizzling pan.

“How did you come to be here?”

Moments ticked by, and she thought he wouldn't answer.

“I didn't escape like you,” he finally offered. “Not that I didn't try. Many, many times. I was always caught, but that didn't stop me from trying, even though the repercussions grew worse with each attempt.” He paused, brows drawn at some memory Analia couldn't imagine. “No, in the end, I had to be saved, by none other than Sebastian himself. He purchased me at an auction and immediately offered me my freedom. I didn't trust

him at first when he offered me a position here on *Marada*. I almost refused, but Sonya actually convinced me to come aboard. She reminded me of my sister..." he trailed off. Anya sensed in him a deep-seated pain, and didn't want to push him for more, but he continued. "My sister was taken...along with me...but we were separated, she's still out there... somewhere."

That meant she could still be a slave. "I'm sorry." Analia didn't know what else to say.

"I remember what Sonya had said that day, to convince me. She said, 'Don't worry. Marik. If Bastian ever acts like he owns you, I'll kick his ass, and we'll take over the ship.' Sebastian had laughed and said she would probably succeed. 'You're damn right I would,' she had said." Analia laughed at that, and Marik gave her a melancholic smile. "They're good people, you're in good hands."

"I hope you're right."

"You could probably stay, if you play your cards right. From what I've seen, half the crew is in love with you already."

Analia shook her head. It sounded nice—really nice in fact—but Darius was a threat to everyone, not just her. She would be responsible if her actions led to anyone here getting hurt, or, more likely, killed. "I really should leave the ship as soon as the wards come down," she said, averting her eyes.

"Will someone be searching for you?" Marik guessed.

Her gaze snapped to his, but before she could formulate an answer, she heard a small crowd of people enter the salon. Eager for escape, she turned to tend to them, was almost out the door when Marik caught her by the arm. She gasped. She hadn't even heard him move. His features were harsh, and her heart began to pound as fear gripped her.

"If someone is after you, we can protect you."

No, they couldn't, but she wouldn't tell him that. She only gave Marik a tight nod, full of emotion from the unexpected offer. "I'll think about it," she lied.

Marik let go of Analia. She disappeared into the salon, clearly afraid. Someone, her *owner* perhaps, might come for her. They'd never take her, of course. Sebastian would rain down destruction on any who threatened his ship, or anyone on it. Even if he was protecting an escaped slave who had snuck aboard. Even if there wasn't something strange going on with him, where Anya was concerned.

Marik had heard about the brawl between Cale and Sebastian, had sensed something was up when Sebastian left that morning. Cale had done a good job at providing a release for Sebastian's rage. Had Sebastian gone to the Edge because Anya hadn't told him of her past? Or was it something more? Marik couldn't put his finger on it, but there was an inkling of a suspicion that nettled at the back of his mind, though it was easily dismissed.

Sebastian never let any woman close.

None of them did. Marik supposed it was because they were all deeply scarred in some way or another. Many of Marik's scars were displayed on the outside, as well as in.

Anya entered the galley, repeating the orders she'd just taken, still not meeting Marik's eyes. She busied herself with cleaning and didn't say another word. When he finished plating the orders, she quietly carried them to their destination.

If someone was searching for her, Sebastian should know about it. Though Marik had faith in the strength of *Marada*, it wouldn't be good to be caught off guard. The next time he saw Sebastian, Marik would relay his suspicions.

No matter what was happening between him and Anya, Sebastian would never let her go back to being a slave. Marik knew this for certain.

At the end of the day, Analia finished helping Marik close down the galley, and headed directly for her room. Sonya hadn't shown up tonight to escort her. She was probably working in her pub. Anya briefly considered stopping by for a minute or two, but she was tired from the long day and hadn't slept well the night before.

On her way, she passed the nursery, the scent of the plants and the energy pulled at her, caressed her senses and almost lured her in, but she passed by, thinking of Sebastian's warning.

Analia noted how tired she was, her body wasn't used to the constant physical exertion of working in the salon. Maybe she *should* try to sleep in the bed tonight, like Sebastian wanted. She didn't want any more morning arguments. Plus, the ship was beginning to feel more comfortable. Safe even. There was a chance she wouldn't be plagued with the usual nightmares. Nightmares that felt so real she would wake up in a sweat, disoriented, and fighting off the phantoms of whichever horror clutched at her. Since she'd been on *Marada*, she hadn't experienced any nightmares, thus far.

Entering her room, Analia walked a few steps before stopping abruptly at the sight before her. She sucked in a harsh breath. “Son of a bitch!” She'd heard that phrase used when people were pissed, and now seemed like the perfect moment for it.

The couch was gone!

A few light dents in the carpet held its place. She stomped her foot and cursed again. “Overbearing stubborn...” She growled. Actually growled.

She stormed out of the room, disgusted with looking at the blank space. She was tempted to find Sebastian and tell him just what she thought of his little stunt, but she decided instead to go to the pub, seeking a female perspective. On the way, she marveled briefly at the notion that she could actually seek a female's perspective.

For a long while, Analia wandered the halls in a huff, circling and searching for something familiar to point her in the right direction. She should have made it to the pub by now. She feared she'd taken a wrong turn. Negotiating corner after corner, Analia finally admitted to herself that she was lost.

“You look lost,” a familiar voice spoke from behind her, causing her to jump. It was Xandar wearing an expensive looking, tan colored shirt and a pair of black trousers. He glanced sideways at her before giving her a slow smile, not the obtrusive smile from before.

“I believe I am. I'm looking for the pub.”

His eyes lit up. “That's where I'm headed now, I'll walk with you.” He turned around. “Follow me. You're going the wrong way.”

Analia flushed and hurried after him, catching up to walk by his side. He smelled faintly of soap, mingled with some fragrance she couldn't name. His blond hair was parted to the side and fell around his face, following the line of his jaw. Anya figured most females would think him handsome.

They walked in silence for a moment before she asked, "Why are you going to the pub so late?"

"I work the evening shift and just got off, so this isn't late for me. Besides this is when the pub really comes alive. I was going there to look for a beautiful woman to keep me company, but it seems I already found one."

Anya felt her cheeks go red.

"Why are *you* going so late?"

"I need to speak with Sonya."

"So this isn't a pleasure cruise? You should stay and keep me company, so I don't get lonely."

"You don't seem like the type of guy who gets lonely."

"Is that a compliment or an insult?"

Analia only shrugged.

"Is your opinion of me already set then? You should get to know me before you make judgments. Come on, stay for a drink and let me change your mind about me."

"Maybe," she offered, not intending to stay long.

When they entered the pub, Xandar followed her to where Sonya stood behind the bar. Music beat in her ears, but it wasn't so bad as to drown out nearby conversation.

Lining the bar were several tall chairs, two of which were unoccupied. Xandar rushed to pull one out for her. That was nice of him. Then he took the seat next to her. Shoot. She was hoping to speak with Sonya privately.

As if summoned, Sonya glided toward them. Tiny black horns poked out of midnight colored hair, which was braided neatly down the sides of her face. She wore a tight black corset with purple strings tied up the center and a short purple, red, and black plaid skirt. Similarly colored striped stockings rose to her upper thighs. And her shoes were, of course,

black high heeled boots. As she walked, her tail swished back and forth from underneath her skirt. Analia envied her confidence.

“Anya!” Sonya squealed, throwing her arms in the air. “You came to see me.”

Analia had to smile at her enthusiasm. She was really beginning to like the demon female. “Hi, Sonya.”

“And Xandar.” Sonya looked him up and down, raising an eyebrow. “What are you doing with my little Anya?”

The corners of his mouth twitched. “Anya?” Xandar tested the name that seemed to be catching on with everyone on the ship. “Anya was lost, and would have wandered the entire ship if I hadn't found her. We'd like to order a couple of drinks, on my tab.”

Drinks?

“Of course. What can I get you?” Sonya replied.

Xandar looked at Analia. “Do you know what you would like, Anya?”

“I...” She shrugged and looked to Sonya for help. “What kind of drinks do you serve? Sebastian said people drink alcohol here, to relax.” She'd said the word alcohol as if she'd never used it before, which she hadn't. “What do you suggest?”

Both Sonya and Xandar gaped at her as if she had sprouted three heads.

“You've never had alcohol?” Xandar asked.

Analia shook her head. “Why is everyone shocked by that?”

Sonya shrugged and answered. “I've never met an alcohol virgin before.” She gave her a sly smile. “We're going to start you off really, really light.” Sonya busied herself with mixing a pink colored drink and placed it in front of Analia. She also filled a tiny glass from the same mix, lifted it in the air, and drank it down in one gulp, slamming the small glass back onto the bar.

Strange.

Sonya watched her expectantly, waiting for her to taste the liquid. Analia brought the slim glass to her lips and sipped it gingerly. Even Xandar watched with unusual interest.

After gathering the flavor, Analia nodded her approval. "It's sweet," she said.

Then Xandar ordered something called Demon's Special Blend. Again, Sonya grabbed a variety of bottles, mixed them in a glass, and handed it to Xandar. His drink was a multicolored concoction, blue at the bottom, purple in the middle, and red at the top. Sonya lit a match by striking it against a rough part of her outfit and inflamed the top of the drink. After a moment, Xandar blew out the fire and sucked down the liquid in one large gulp. Now it was Anya's turn to gape.

The expression on her face made Xandar laugh. "You should just sip your drink. Alcohol can affect you in different ways, and since you've never had it before, you should be careful."

She tilted her head at him. "How can it affect you?"

"Well, it depends on the species, and even then it depends on the individual. Some become relaxed, happy, giddy, lusty, or giggly. Then there's the opposite emotions. Like sad, depressed, angry, or violent."

Sonya chimed in. "For most, it gives a relaxed euphoric feeling, but the same thing happens to everyone when they drink too much."

"And what's that?"

"If you drink too much, you can become very ill."

Anya took another sip, a little more wary than before. Then something caught the corner of her eye, and her attention was drawn to the door.

Sebastian had just entered.

Sebastian scented her before he saw her. Calic was with him and already had his hand clamped on Sebastian's shoulder in warning.

Anya was sitting next to Xandar. Sebastian had nothing against the guy, but seeing him next to Anya, talking and leaning close, had him seeing red. As he recalled, Xandar usually respected the rule no sex among crew members, but not always. Then again, Anya wasn't really part of the crew. *Damn.*

Cale pulled him to a table farthest away from the bar. As Sebastian sat, he wondered if Anya had been to her room yet. A fiendish grin spread across his lips. He knew that tonight she would be forced to take the bed, seeing as there was no longer anywhere else to sleep.

Cale raised a curious eyebrow at him, and Sebastian dropped his smile.

“What's with the look? You're not about to go psycho on me again are you? Not that I wouldn't enjoy kicking your ass again.”

“No, I was just thinking of something funny.” Focusing once again on Anya, Sebastian caught her gaze. She gave him a look that, if it were a physical thing, would have sliced through him with venom. He smiled, shooting back a wink. With her movements sharp, she turned away. *Yup, she's been to her room.* He couldn't hold back a chuckle.

Cale was scrutinizing the entire scene. “Sebastian?” he said slowly. “What did you do?”

“Nothing. We're just playing a game, she and I, and I'm winning.”

Cale rolled his eyes and let out a snort. “Yeah, right.”

Sonya sauntered over and sat at their table with a dramatic plop. “Hey guys, do you see Anya with Xandar? He's laying it on thick. Someone should keep an eye on that.”

They all looked at the two in question. They were laughing, Anya's face was turning red, and she was half covering it with her hands in a show of embarrassment. Xandar reached out and pulled her hand away. Keeping her hand clasped in his, he whispered something in her ear.

Grinding his teeth, Sebastian looked away. “Sonya,” he rasped. “Keep a close eye on her. Walk her back to her room if you have to.”

Sonya nodded. "Okay, but you'll have to stay and keep an eye on the bar till I get back." When Sebastian nodded in agreement, she continued. "She's never had a lick of alcohol. I gave her very little, but..." She looked back at Anya and shook her head. "I'll watch her."

Calic cleared his throat. "Yeah, yeah, she's a big girl. Grown woman and all that." He looked pointedly to Sebastian. "If your objective is avoidance, then don't go interfering in her affairs." Then, grumpily, he ordered, "Two Infernos."

Sonya bristled. She slammed her hand down on the table with such force that the entire room went quiet and focused on their table. Most quickly realized it was a table of demons and resumed their own conversations, unconcerned by the outburst. However, Anya's gaze lingered.

Sonya angrily faced Cale. "First and foremost, don't order me around! Second, Anya has had a tough life, and she deserves a little looking after. Got it?" Her horns had gone fully red, indicating her level of anger.

Backing down, Cale replied, "Got it, watch the chit, keep her safe. Why's everyone got such a hardon for her, anyway?"

Sonya huffed and left without responding, returning shortly with their drinks. Sebastian's glass was set nicely in front of him. Calic's was slammed down on the table, causing half of it to slosh and spill on the table. Calic ground out a sarcastic thank you as Sonya walked away.

Usually a quarrel between Cale and Sonya would amuse Sebastian, but today it barely registered. His constant attention was on Anya. She was laughing and enjoying herself with another male, and that bothered him more than it should.

He gulped down his drink, and a rush of warmth and an aftershock of a sting entered his throat. When Sonya glanced over, he motioned for another. Calic, silently brooding, had finished his drink just as quickly.

When Sonya came with two more drinks, she had a slightly sweeter demeanor and gave Sebastian her pouty eyes. Inwardly, Sebastian cringed. This ought to be good.

“You know,” she drawled, “with the wards and contract and such, I’m going to be really busy here at The Demon’s Punchbowl, don’t you think?”

Sebastian looked at Cale, who was now grinning, knowing the battle had switched from him to Sebastian.

Sonya continued. “I was thinking about keeping the pub open longer, to capitalize on the constant flow of customers.”

Sebastian gave her a dreary look.

“When Anya leaves the ship, wouldn’t it be good if she had some money in her pocket? I could pay her.”

Sebastian’s stomach twisted.

Cale laughed out loud.

Thinking about Anya working here in the pub, serving drunken males, made his teeth grind. Sonya was tough and could handle herself. But Anya?

Sonya read his face perfectly. “I’ll train her, stay with her till she can do it on her own. Come on, Marik doesn’t need help in the galley, and she would be such a draw, I could pay her so much,” she pleaded. “You have to admit, it would be a really great opportunity for her, and she would get some experience with how to deal with males, I’ll be sure of that. I’m worried for her when she leaves us. I want her to be prepared.”

Sebastian suddenly felt like his skin was being stuck with a thousand pins and needles. Anya *should* learn how to handle herself before she leaves *Marada*. Otherwise, she could easily end up back where she started.

He glanced in Anya’s direction. Xandar had his hand on her thigh, and Sebastian thought she looked a little...uncomfortable. He registered the feel of Sonya patting his shoulder, and realized he had been growling out loud. If Anya had more experience with males, and a little more

confidence in herself, Xandar's hand would possibly be shoved up his own ass at the moment.

Sonya had always been good at dealing with males of all kinds and could help Anya in certain ways. He hated the idea, but Anya needed to know how to protect herself. Sebastian nodded to Sonya and she jumped out of her seat with joy, rushing back to the bar. Sebastian called after her, “*I’ll* tell her in the morning, Sonya!” Then he looked at Cale with an expectant gleam in his eye. There was something else Anya should learn.

“Wait, wait, wait.” Cale held up both hands. “What are you thinking? And the answer is no. No!”

“She should know how to protect herself, Cale.”

“So, get her a dog. One with three heads, I don't care.”

“I’ll expect you to train her.”

“No! I'm no trainer. Ask me to kick the shit out of someone, sure, but I'm not a trainer. I don't even believe the chit's story. She's fooling you all.”

“It doesn't matter. We're all stuck together for possibly the next seven or more months.” Once they reached the first rendezvous point, their real destination would be revealed, which meant Sebastian had no idea how long this mission would last. “You need something to occupy your mind. What better way?”

“With loads of women! What about you, why don't you train her?”

Sebastian looked back at Anya. Xandar was no longer touching her, but he was still too close for comfort. “Do you really need the answer to that?”

“Right,” he sneered. “Because you can't control yourself.”

“Seems so.”

“Well, what about Marik? Or...anyone else? There are lots of decent fighters on the ship who would suffice.”

“I only trust you to do this.”

Cale growled, “Fine, but I'm not going easy on the chit. She'd better be ready to deal with a demon.”

Analia tried to ignore Sebastian and focused her attention on Xandar. He was a talker and kept the conversation at a steady rhythm. But she was constantly stealing glances at Sebastian.

Under a long black coat, Sebastian wore a plain white shirt and a pair of black pants that fit him just right. A thick silver chain necklace hung around his neck, mirroring the neckline of his shirt. Dark horns poked through his black hair, which ruffled around his face.

The sight of him made Analia's body respond in a big way. Blood quickened through her veins. He looked intense as he spoke to Sonya and Cale, glancing her way every so often.

Xandar had asked her a question, breaking her attention away. “What?” She replied.

“I asked what your home planet was like.”

Analia buried her distress. Of all the invasive questions from the last few days, no one had asked her that one. She shook her head. “I'd much rather hear about *your* home planet.”

Xandar chuckled. “I don't have one. I'm a space-lifer. Born and raised. I'll probably die in space too. What about you?”

Again, she avoided the question. “You don't ever want to settle on a planet?”

“Nah, from what I hear, it's a boring existence. There are planets I like to visit, but I've never found one that was so enticing it could make me

want to stay in one spot forever.”

Analia took another sip of her near-empty drink. She was feeling a little strange, she suspected she was the giggly type, but was suppressing the urge—at least, she thought she was.

Sonya bounced toward them with a satisfied grin.

“Why are you so happy?” A little slur crept into Analia's voice.

Sonya simply smiled at her. “Are you ready to go back to your room? I have a feeling you'll have a big day tomorrow.”

Anya tilted her head. “What do you mean?”

“I can't say for sure. I just have a feeling.”

“I do need to get some sleep.” Analia slid off the chair, taking a moment to steady her balance. Then she really did giggle.

“I'll walk her back,” Xandar offered.

“No, I'll take her. You stay and finish your drink. If you need anything, Sebastian and Cale will be watching over the bar.”

As they passed, Analia tossed Sebastian another angry look. He only grinned and waved.

Sonya helped her down the hall. In the last hour, her heels seemed to have become harder to walk in.

Sonya chuckled. “I guess next time we'll go even lighter on the alcohol. I think it might have an abnormally strong effect on your kind. Or maybe it's just you.”

For some reason, Analia found that extremely funny, and after laughing herself to the floor, she remembered she needed to speak with Sonya about something. About Bastian. “What is wrong with your brother?” She blurted.

Sonya picked her up from the floor. “Which one?”

“Bastian.”

“He's a bit of a control freak mostly, strong fighter, an unnatural sense of integrity, a little too honest in my opinion. Why?”

“He's being a jerk!” Her mouth seemed to have no filter.

Sonya snorted. “I can imagine. He's...odd over you. More protective than I've ever seen him. Even more than he is with me. He just wants what's best for you, I think.”

Now Analia snorted, mimicking Sonya. “Like he knows what's best for me.”

When they entered her room, Sonya asked, “Anya? Where's the couch?”

“Exactly!”

“Ookaaay.”

Analia waved her hand at the empty space. “He took it. It's gone. No more couch. If he thinks this is over, then he is so wrong. I don't need a damn couch. I've gone without for decades.”

Sonya looked truly confused now. Analia couldn't understand why. She had explained herself perfectly.

Sonya helped her change into the comfortable shirt that Sebastian had given her and after asking for the umpteenth time if she was okay, bid her good night.

Once Sonya was gone, Analia angrily stripped the bed and fashioned a nest out of the covers in the corner of the room. Bastian was trying to force her to his will by taking away the couch, and she felt it was essential to her new sense of freedom that she not submit.

She threw the pillows down with a little more force than necessary and then snuggled in. Sebastian might show up in the morning or he might not. She didn't care.

In the morning, Sebastian showered and strapped on his clothes. He'd kept himself up all night, debating having Anya work at the pub. When he thought he had finally come to a decision, another worry would crop up.

The males on his ship were fairly tame, while on the ship anyway, but the pubs and bars in the space cities were rowdy, feral places. Imagining Anya in one of those places tweaked every protective bone in his body. Why should he care? She wasn't his responsibility. But he couldn't send her out on her own without some knowledge of what was out there. Hell, her natural curiosity alone would get her killed.

Over the last few days he found himself thinking about all the space cities and planets that he'd frequented as a merchant. There were a lot. He wanted to find the best place for her, where she could be safe, free from harm. He was at a loss.

But after delaying long enough, he headed toward the salon to inform Marik of Anya's move. He thought, at the very least, Marik would be happy about the situation.

How wrong he was.

Sonya was already in the salon, seething, and Marik stalked toward him, looking pissed. "Bastian! What the hell is this? Sonya says Anya's going to work in the pub from now on?"

Sebastian hesitated and gave Sonya an irritated look. "We talked it over last night. We think it would be good for her."

"And she'll earn some money." Sonya hummed her satisfaction.

Marik glared at her. "You mean *you'll* earn some money. Why wasn't I there for this discussion? I need her here. She's doing fine here. You promised me an assistant, and I get her for what, only two days? There's more to learn in a galley than there is in slinging drinks. What will that teach her?"

Sonya's body shot stiff. "I do more than sling drinks! I have to manage people..."

“You manage friends, and people you've known for years,” he interrupted.

“Well Anya doesn't know them. And it would give her some much-needed experience for when she leaves us.”

“So would working in my galley. You don't think she's learned how to manage people here? There's not much difference between my galley and your pub.”

“The hell there isn't. You serve people to fill their bellies and then they leave. I serve drinks that make people lose their common sense. I have to keep an eye on everyone to make sure nothing gets out of hand, and when it does I have to take command of the situation. There is much more skill needed for my job.”

Marik growled, getting in Sonya's face. She didn't back down. Her horns were beginning to turn deep burgundy.

“Enough!” Sebastian bellowed. The two backed away from each other, but didn't lose the challenge in their stare. “Marik, I thought this was what you wanted.”

He didn't answer. Instead, he commented, “I suppose you believe her working in the pub will give her some kind of skill that will protect her in the future.”

“Cale will be training her to fight, as well.”

“It won't help.”

Sebastian eyed him. “Why not?”

“Yesterday, she wouldn't say for sure, but she gave me the impression that someone would be coming after her. She's afraid.”

Sebastian digested this new information. It made sense that whoever Anya had escaped would want her back. The question was how badly.

“She should keep working here,” Marik said. “She feels a connection with me, because of our similar backgrounds, and I might be able to get her to open up more.”

Sonya shook her head. “That means nothing unless she's staying on the ship for good. When she leaves, she'll need certain skills for her own protection. Besides, she might feel more comfortable opening up to me.”

They both turned toward Sebastian.

For a long while, he said nothing. He needed time to think everything through. Glancing around, Sebastian recalled how elated Anya had been to be working in the salon. She seemed to have settled in well.

Though Marik and Anya shared a common past, Sonya was a strong female, and Anya could learn much from her. Sonya never failed to put an abrasive male in his place and could take hold of any situation.

Either way Anya would be starting her training with Cale today, first thing. If someone was, in fact, searching for her, as Marik suspected, Anya should learn how to protect herself.

Finally, Sebastian broke the silence. “I'll consider both sides and come to a decision by lunch.”

Sonya's jaw dropped, while Marik nodded.

Sebastian turned and walked away without another word. It was time to see how Anya fared without her precious couch.

CHAPTER 9



Anya awoke to a room bathed in darkness, which meant Sebastian wasn't there. She wondered at the time, but elected to stay in her warm collection of blankets. Once again, she'd slept poorly. Releasing a soft sigh, she wondered why she hadn't just accepted defeat and taken the bed.

The rumble of this ship was different from what she was accustomed to. Unfamiliar sounds and vibrations through the floor had woke her constantly.

Suddenly, she sensed an energy in the room besides her own. She shot straight up and scanned her surroundings. A dark male figure sat across the room facing her. She sucked in a harsh breath. Scooting back, she hit the wall. Not a single movement betrayed him. Only his silhouette was visible. He was so still, she couldn't even tell he was breathing. Her heart spiked in her chest. Was this a nightmare? If it was, it was a damn real one.

"Good morning." It was Sebastian.

The revelation didn't calm her. He was malevolent, watching her from a chair that was pulled out deliberately to face her. He must be livid. Oh, why had she challenged him? Curling tighter into the corner, Analia awaited his first move.

Then, in an undecipherable tone, he called, "Lights!"

The lights flashed bright. Analia shut her eyes to the sting, struggling every so often to open them and keep him in her sights. His expression was unreadable, almost void of emotion. Well, all but one. There was definite anger there, but as soon as she caught a glimpse of it, it was gone.

They stayed like that for—she didn't know how long. Him, staring at her with emptiness in his eyes; her watchful and wary. He seemed to be studying her. Every so often, it looked as though he would speak, but then changed his mind. What was he thinking? He must be deciding on a punishment.

Finally, he said, "Get yourself ready. There's been a change in your schedule. Pick out some clothes that you can move easily in."

Uh oh.

"What change?"

"I'll explain when we get there."

His expression was blank, but she could sense his ire. Why hadn't he commented on her sleeping arrangement? Was the change in schedule her punishment? She closed her eyes at the thought, wanting to bury her face in her hands. Instead, she stood, holding his cold gaze for a moment, before searching for some clothing that she could *move easily in*.

She showered and dressed quickly while Sebastian waited outside. She'd chosen a soft pair of soft clingy pants and a simple T-shirt. The mirror reflected her fearful expression, and she took a moment to gather her courage. Sebastian couldn't possibly be more creative than Darius when it came to doling out punishment. Could he?

She recalled one of the many times she hung from the center of a room, arms tied above her, until she thought they would rip from the sockets. She'd survived that. Or the time he had locked her in a small box, which forced her in a fetal position, for days. A square opening the size of

a fingernail was her only source of air and light. She'd survived that. No matter what, she would survive anything Sebastian had to throw at her.

Bring it on.

Sebastian hadn't moved. He was still sitting on the chair, pondering the pile of blankets she'd left sitting in the corner. Slowly he rose, and advanced toward her.

Analía stopped breathing.

"This will do nicely," he said, eyeing her clothing. Then he walked past her out the door, expecting her to follow.

Reluctantly, she did.

Silence hovered between them through the halls. Sebastian's body was stiff as he led her. It was obvious by the energy rolling off him that he wanted to howl at her. But he said nothing. She almost wished that he would. It would be better than the muted exchange that was happening between them.

She wanted to tell him she would use the bed, if only he would allow her to continue working in the galley with Marik. Instead, she decided to remain quiet.

Finally, they reached the recreation room. Analía scanned the exercise equipment, as well as the weapons on the walls. At the sight of them, she swallowed the thick lump that had been building in her throat.

What was he planning?

Through a side door, a large mat stretched across the floor and a lot more weapons were encased or draped on racks.

Calic stood waiting in the middle of the mat with his arms crossed leisurely, a dreary look painted his features. "It's about bloody time. I was beginning to think you wouldn't show," he said, and then gestured with his thumb and forefinger. "Was this close to going about my business and saying to hell with you."

"We were delayed," Sebastian replied smoothly.

Delayed? She'd been ready in minutes. There'd been no delay on her part. Unless...how long had Sebastian watched her sleep?

Sebastian motioned to Calic with his head. "You start training today. You'll be training with Cale for a few hours each morning. After that, you'll serve in the galley, through lunch only. Then you'll head to The Demon's Punchbowl. There, you'll spend some time working for Sonya. She'll teach you the ropes, among other things."

Stunned, Analia took a moment to gather a reply. "Is this...Is this punishment?" She glanced at Cale, who winked at her.

Sebastian cocked his head. "No punishment. The training is for your benefit. Cale will teach you to defend yourself. While you're working for Sonya, she will pay you in *touri*, which is a common currency for most space cities, so you'll have something saved up by the time..." Sebastian trailed off. "I'll be back in two hours to make sure everything went alright." With that he was gone, and she was alone with Cale.

She sensed that he wanted to be here about as much as she did.

Watching him, she waited for whatever was about to come. Cale looked smug on the mat as he crooked a finger at her. Stepping onto the mat, Analia felt her shoes sink in slightly. There were several weapons set deliberately at the edge.

Cale picked up two long, thin swords. "Here," he said, tossing one to her. Instinctively, Analia jumped out of the way—it didn't matter that he'd tossed it hilt first. The sword landed with a thud.

He rolled his eyes. "Pick it up."

Lifting the sword, Analia was surprised at the weight of it. With astonishment, she commented, "This is a real sword, and it looks sharp. I thought we would...shouldn't we practice first?" She shook her head in confusion. "I've never done this before."

"We will use these for practice. It will help you to take this seriously. Try not to cut yourself. Now, hold the sword out. Like this." Cale

demonstrated with his arm and sword straight out, as if he and the sword were one appendage.

Analia followed his example. At least she thought she had. Circling her, Cale meticulously adjusted her. He adjusted her shoulders, her grip, how far apart her feet were, even the angle of her head.

“Focus on your body. Feel the grip of the sword. Feel how your body is balanced against the weight of the sword. Keep your head straight,” he scolded when she moved to look at him.

Facing her again, Cale mimicked her stance and swung the sword hard and fast, slashing at the air. The sharp sound of it made her flinch. “Watch me,” he said, as he slowed down the move. “Now you do it.”

Analia tried, and failed to recreate the motion.

For a moment, Cale was quiet, his expression turning dark. “I don't believe you are who you say you are.”

Analia's brows drew together.

“Tell me why you're here.” Cale angled his sword at her, forcing her to back away.

Shock and fear filled her at the change in mood. She looked around, for what she wasn't sure. The door was closed. She was trapped. “I'm s... sorry? I don't know what you mean.”

He moved forward, and she backed away.

She choked out, “I don't know how to prove myself to you.”

“Tell me who sent you here.” Cale held the sword to her throat, her heels dangled on the edge of the mat. All she could do was watch him as the tip of the sword bit into her skin, though not quite enough to draw blood. “The truth will be known. You can't hide who you are,” he growled.

Analia shook her head, but didn't respond.

“Know this. If you're here to hurt my ship, or my crew, I will make sure you truly do know suffering.”

Her whole body trembled. She might have already put fate into motion regarding the safety of the ship and crew. Her mere presence may have irrevocably marked them all for death.

Once more, Calic's mood changed. Still holding the weapon to her, he continued as if he hadn't just threatened her. "If someone has you in this position, what do you think your best move would be?"

Analia gaped at him. He didn't trust her. Thought she was someone else entirely, but he was still prepared to train her? To give her skills that, in his mind, might one day be used against them?

These demons were difficult to understand.

Her mind raced. "I could dive out of the way?" All she wanted to do was run.

"Not a bad idea, but I can strike faster than you could dodge. You would need to distract me, or catch me off guard. You could use that sword in your hand to knock mine away. Give it a try."

She had forgotten about her sword. Tightening her grip on the hilt she hesitated, not sure how to accomplish the move without causing his sword to slash across her own throat. Her breath came fast, and her body tensed.

"Do it!" he ordered.

In a clumsy move, she bowed her back, clearing her neck from harm. Her sword swooshed up, dully clanging against his. Though his sword barely moved an inch, she lost her balance completely. Her butt met the hard floor, and her sword clattered to the ground beside her. She knew her face was flaming when she looked back up at Cale.

He stood tall, looking down at her with a raised eyebrow. "That was really bad."

Embarrassment turned to ire. "What did you expect? I've never even touched a sword before!"

"Get up. We'll start again."

Analia pulled herself off the floor and reached for the sword.

“Leave it. We'll come back to the sword later.”

After gingerly setting it back down, she followed Cale to the middle of the mat. He'd gone quiet and kept glancing at her in an I'm-going-to-figure-you-out sort of way.

Ha! Good luck with that. She couldn't even figure herself out.

Suddenly, he moved so quickly she didn't have time to comprehend a possible reaction. He grabbed her from behind and wrapped his arms around her torso, squeezing the breath from her lungs.

No, this wasn't punishment. This was torture.

All business, Cale said, “If you're caught like this, what's your next move?”

Analia wiggled and writhed against his hold. She hated feeling trapped and being held against her will. Panic raced like a toxin through her, clouding her mind. She let out a terror laced whimper.

“Calm down and take stock,” Cale said in a soft tone. Well, soft for him. “What parts of your body can you move?”

Through the haze of her anxiety, she replied, “My legs. I can move my legs.”

“And your head. If someone your own height were to grab you from behind, you could use your skull to bloody his nose. It would be painful and blind him for a moment. You could stomp your heel into his foot. Your forearms are also free in this hold, and you could do much damage to a man's lower regions. A decent hit will send him to his knees. Once his grip has been loosened enough to free your arms, use your elbow as hard as you can against his head, or wherever you can get a good strong hit.”

Analia nodded, picturing all the moves in her head. But picturing and doing were two different things.

Cale had her practice in slow motions for some time, before he said, “Good enough for now. Let's move on.”

She could already feel the soreness in her body, but was surprisingly eagerly for his next lesson.

Just as before, Cale moved swiftly into his next hold. His arm shot out like a whip, giving her no time to react. Powerful hands wrapped around her small throat, and he squeezed with a gentle pressure, enough to be uncomfortable, but not enough to really hurt her.

He meant to prove a point, but Analia knew this hold well, had been on the receiving end of it many times. This was a hold that could easily render her unconscious. She kept steady, oddly feeling safe even though her pulse spiked wildly.

“How should you counter?” Cale asked.

“I could kick you in your bollocks.”

He smiled at her candor. “Aye, you could, but a man of any brains would expect a move like that in this position. A better move would be to raise your arm up and bring your elbow down across my arms. If you learn to do it right, you will break my hold, and will be able to get yourself in a more suitable position for a counterattack. *Then* you go for the bollocks.”

He had her practice this move for a long time. She must have rammed her arm into his a thousand times. It wasn't until she had accomplished a smooth, fluid action, breaking his hold and successfully scrambling away, that he moved on.

“Now pick up your sword.”

Oh no.

She peered at the heap of metal. “I...uh.”

With that, Cale gave her a look that said she had better do as he says. His fist was already clasping the hilt of his sword. She snatched hers from the ground and faced him with the sharp tip hanging at her side.

“I'm going to slash at you, and you're going to defend yourself. Ready?”

“What?”

He swung his sword upward, and she jumped back, just barely avoiding falling on her ass again.

“Defend! Use your sword to block mine. Don't worry, I will not hit you.” Cale swung again, and she tried to meet his metal with hers.

Clang!

She felt the vibration of it through her wrists.

“Hold it tight, like it's an extension of yourself.”

This time when she swiped through the air, her whole arm lashed out. Both swords struck with force. The vibration snaked up her arm.

She winced, and he grated, “Better.”

He took a moment to show her specific moves, slow and calculating. He showed her the right angle to defend against certain attacks, and the proper counter moves for others. The practice drew on and on, until she thought her arms and legs would turn to putty. Then he said four little words that made her heart crash land in her stomach.

“Now you attack me.”

Gripping the hilt of her sword, she froze. “Shouldn't I practice on a dummy or something? I might...”

“If you can even touch me with the air from your swing, I'll eat my own hand. Now do it. Attack!”

Her first strike was limp, and he batted it away with the smallest flick of his wrist. She tried again, and this time was no better. The third was worse, and even she knew it lacked conviction.

“Pathetic. Try harder.”

She did, but only a little. Countless more swings of her sword and she was panting. Sweat gleamed on her skin.

Cale growled at her lack of progress. “What gets your blood boiling? What makes you angry? Who has wronged you?”

Darius.

“Close your eyes and think of someone else in my place. If you can, try to remember a time when you were full of rage, and hold on to it.”

She didn't have to think long. There were too many times to choose from, too many moments when she thought she would go mad from the anger festering inside her. It was still there, underneath the surface, clawing to get free. She'd spent so much time burying it she hardly recognized when a spike of fury flushed through her.

Darius, murdering her mother! Darius, locking her away! His breath on her neck as he would tell her she belonged to him. The memories of every time he abused her, or tried to break her, started to flood her mind.

When the sound of metal grating against metal filled the air, she opened her eyes. Her body had moved without her permission, and even Cale looked a little shocked.

“Very good!” His eyes flashed with something like approval. “Again!” he ordered.

Her rage hadn't left her. In fact, it was still growing. Maddening. Harder than before, she slashed at Cale, picturing only Darius.

Clang!

Without a pause, her sword carved through the air.

Clang!

Darius, ripping at her hair.

Clang!

Throwing her to the ground.

Clang!

Laughing at her pain.

Clang!

His eyes swimming with pleasure at what he was about to do to her.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

She went mindless with her rage, her horror, her fury. Only the sound of metal on metal satisfied her, wishing it was metal against flesh. At

some point she'd begun to cry out with every swing and was advancing on the mat. She no longer felt her body. A building energy buzzed through her, and guided her movements.

The image of her sword slashing through Darius swam in her mind, though his expression remained arrogant, always looking at her as though superior to her in every way. He reached out and grabbed her shoulders.

Analia screamed.

“Anya!” Two male voices yelled her name repeatedly.

The image of Darius vanished, and she felt warm tears streaking down her face.

Shaking, Analia sank to her knees, burying her face in her hands. Fuzzy images of the memories she'd called still misted through her mind. Warm arms gently came around her, and she smelled the musky scent of Bastian. How long had he been here?

Fisting his shirt in her hands, Analia clung to him as she sobbed. “Don't let him hurt me anymore!” She couldn't stop the words from coming out. Sebastian tightened his grip on her. Analia felt his head snap to Cale and could only blubber unintelligibly.

“She's not talking about me, mate!”

She thought she heard a hint of concern in Cale's voice, but decided she was mistaken.

Sebastian forced a soft tone. “Who are you talking about, sweets?”

Analia shook her head, her face still buried in the crook of his neck. Her grip was like a vice on his collar, as though she would never let go.

Her only response was a gut-wrenching wail that cut him to the bone.

What had brought her to this? Once again, he turned his attention on Cale, who looked at Anya as though he didn't know what to make of her. To anyone else, Cale would have seemed uncaring, but Sebastian saw the gleam of guilt in his eyes.

Anya's sobs slowed to a quiet weep, though her body was still shaking wildly. Sebastian petted her hair, hating himself because she was willingly in his arms, and he felt a twinge of satisfaction for it. He knew it was only because she was so distraught that she allowed the contact, but like the selfish bastard he was, Sebastian would take anything he could get.

"Shh..." he cooed. "You're safe. No one will hurt you here." He didn't know if his words had any effect. Reveling in her warmth, he pulled her tighter against him. She responded by wrapping her arms around his neck. A hitch in her breath was the only sound from her now.

He didn't know how long they sat like that, but when she began to pull away, he reluctantly let her go.

After rising to a stand, her red eyes darted between him and Cale. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "That won't happen again."

"What is it, exactly, that happened?" Sebastian asked. When she didn't respond, he pointed to Cale. "Did he hurt you?" He knew Cale wouldn't have hurt her intentionally. He only asked to get her talking.

In a solemn voice, Anya replied, "No, Cale didn't hurt me."

Sebastian scowled in frustration. "Tell me who did."

She gave him a silent, withering look.

"I will find out."

Anya only shrugged.

"Do you feel up to working in the galley today? I could take you back to your room." Sebastian was hoping for the latter. Not only did she look tired, but her melancholy plagued him. And for reasons beyond his comprehension, he wanted her well rested and smiling again.

Plus, during the training he had replaced her couch. Not with the old one, but with one from his own room. It was soft, comfortable, and large. It would make a satisfactory bed for her.

When he'd seen her huddled on the floor this morning, Sebastian had realized she wouldn't back down and accepted defeat. He thought if she saw what he'd done for her, it might cheer her up, but to his disappointment Anya shook her head and said she'd like to see Marik.

A pang of jealousy nagged at him. Marik had a connection with her, a shared experience that Sebastian would never understand.

Cale interrupted his thoughts. "You impressed me today, Anya. And that's not easily done. I expect you here tomorrow."

With a tight nod she turned and walked away. Sebastian remained only a second longer to order Cale to meet with him later before catching up with Anya. At first she didn't acknowledge him, just kept walking as if he wasn't there. He was okay with that. He only wanted to stay near her in case she broke down again.

"You don't have to walk with me. I know the way now." Her voice seemed empty, but he knew there must be a storm of feelings brewing inside her.

"Maybe I'd like to walk with you."

Laughing without humor she replied, "I think you want to make sure I don't blubber all over myself on the way there."

Sebastian didn't respond.

"I'm fine now."

"I don't think you are. I think you're on the Edge."

She whipped around, coming to an abrupt stop. "Why do you care? I don't understand you! Why don't you just leave me alone?"

Sebastian didn't know what to say. He himself couldn't understand why he felt such a pull toward her. He was constantly trying to keep his distance, trying not to care. He didn't care. Did he?

As she looked at him expectantly, Sebastian pondered how best to respond. He decided to go with the truth. "I feel...protective of you. I shouldn't, but I do. I just want you to be safe. Happy." He paused. "And I want to find the person who hurt you and rip out his goddamn throat." Sebastian growled the last part and her jaw dropped. Turning, she began her swift pace again.

Not a word was spoken between them until they entered the salon, and even then, she only thanked him before disappearing into the galley.

Marik was pissed.

Anya had arrived to work the lunch crowd, but she was like a shell of her former self. She was closed off and wouldn't talk to him. Marik tried to ask her what happened during training, but she only shook her head. She hardly spoke all day, offering short comments when anyone tried to strike up a conversation. She still worked hard, but it was as though a cloud of gloom surrounded her.

Marik wasn't angry with Anya, but with Sebastian and Cale. Even Sonya would be wise to stay clear of him. Whatever the cause of her mood, it was most assuredly their doing. They didn't understand the inner turmoil of a newly freed slave. How could they? They had watched Marik go through so much during his recovery, had empathized with him as best they could, but that was different than truly understanding.

When Anya was serving the final customer of her shift, Sebastian and Cale entered the salon, taking a corner table. Marik saw her glance at them

for only a second before hurrying into the galley to hand Marik her last order.

It was for soup and required no preparation. Marik filled a bowl, but left it on the counter. "Stay here for a minute," he ordered, and entered the salon, stalking toward the two men.

Glancing his way, they knew immediately that he was pissed, and offered no surprise as to why he might be looking at them with daggers in his eyes. When he reached the table, he didn't greet them. In a low, but harsh tone, he said, "What the fuck did you do to her?"

Cale spoke first, "During training, I had her tap into her anger. I didn't know it would be so strong."

Marik scoffed. "Do you remember what happened when you tried that with me?" He had almost taken Cale's head off.

"And look at you now, the picture of perfection," Cale sneered.

"You have no idea what she's been through."

"Neither do you. You may have both been slaves, but your situations were different."

"Aye, and hers no doubt was worse, but I know more than you do, Cale. I've known pain like you couldn't imagine."

"Oh, really? Do you know what it's like to lose a mate?"

"I know what it's like to lose family."

"Enough!" Sebastian grated. "This isn't a competition. We've all suffered. Every one of us. No one can know what the other is going through, and that includes Anya. That's why she will continue training. Learning to control her emotions, while defending herself, could save her life one day. Don't you agree?" They both nodded. "Today was a setback. There are always setbacks in the beginning."

Cale's shoulders went back. "She's a good student. Didn't complain, though I could see it in her face she wanted to. And fast, when she... caught her stride."

“Just go easy on her,” Marik replied. "She's still healing."

A spark of realization covered Sebastian's features. “Does Anya remind you of your sister?”

Marik reluctantly nodded.

“You know Cale is a good trainer. He would do nothing to hurt her.”

“Yeah, yeah, I'm a fucking angel,” Cale scoffed and leaned back in his chair.

Just then Anya appeared in the salon, heading straight toward them. She gave each of them a wary look before she asked Sebastian, “Are you here to walk with me again?”

Sebastian looked as though he were torn. “Can you find your way?”

“Yes.”

“Then I will leave you to it, unless...Do you want me to?”

Without hesitation, Anya replied, “It's not necessary.” She looked at each of them in turn. "I'll be fine.”

Marik knew she wasn't talking about finding the pub with that last remark. He watched her leave, thinking; maybe it would be good for her to get closer to Sonya. Women have their own way of comforting each other, and their tactics seemed to elude male kind.

Analía was glad to get out of there.

It was obvious they were arguing, probably about her. She didn't care. What she'd gone through during Cale's training was none of their business. She was upset with herself for breaking down as she had and vowed that it would not happen again. She would concentrate on learning what she could

from Cale, so she could leave here with confidence. That would be her only focus.

Sonya waved her over as soon as she entered the pub. "Did Bastian explain to you why you're here?" she asked.

Analía nodded.

Sonya froze and studied her. "What's wrong?"

Was she that transparent? She tried to fake a smile. "I'm fine."

"No you're not. What happened? Was Cale being an ass?"

Analía remained quiet.

"You might as well tell me, because I don't give up till I get what I want."

Rolling her eyes, Anya proceeded to explain her failure this morning. Sonya listened quietly till the end. Then, to Anya's confusion, Sonya smiled.

"I'm proud of you. It sounds like you really caught Cale off guard. It takes years to tap into your emotions for use in battle like that. Demons train for decades to accomplish it. I know it must feel awful now, but it will get better. There will come a time when you can tap the emotions for their strengths and keep yourself separate from the memory that inspired the emotion in the first place." Sonya paused. A mischievous smile crossed her lips. "Then you'll have the boys running for the hills."

"Running for the hills?"

"Yeah. Fleeing to escape your wrath."

Anya laughed at that. But Sonya did have a point. Before she had engaged her anger, she'd been useless with the sword. Much of it was fuzzy now, but she remembered causing Cale to step back more than once. Obviously because he was stunned, but still. She smiled. "I didn't fail."

"That's my girl. Now let's serve some drinks."

There was a lot involved with serving drinks. In Marik's galley, he did the cooking while she only delivered it. Here Sonya expected *her* to mix

the drinks exactly as she explained. There was a lot to remember, and she made more than a few mistakes.

To her humiliation, a man with long, orange dreadlocks and golden skin spit out a drink she had served him. Anya tried to apologize as best she could, but the man just waved her away and ordered her in a rough tone to *fix it*. Furthering Anya's humiliation, Sonya had scolded the man and forced him to apologize to her for his behavior.

Sonya had no fear. She was a strong female who *didn't take crap from anyone*, as she put it. Sonya was in charge here and didn't hesitate to let it be known.

Anya was awed.

After the thirteenth or fourteenth drink order, Anya began to get a handle on it. She liked it when someone ordered one of the bottled drinks, and she only had to open it for them. That was nice and easy. Most of them, however, liked their drinks mixed...and strong.

Many of the people she'd served in the salon showed up at the pub, greeted her with kindness, and thankfully, patience as she stumbled through making their drinks.

Sonya was kept busy as well. It became hectic when more than ten people were demanding drinks at once, but Sonya seemed to thrive on that. Joking and talking with the crowd to keep them occupied while they waited.

As the night drew on, some of the patrons—after multiple drinks—grew noticeably mellow or affectionate, while others became more animated and loud. This must be what Xandar meant when he said alcohol affected individuals differently.

A quarrel broke out and Analia watched as Sonya took control to calm the situation. Two men had begun shoving each other, spouting in a language she didn't understand. Sonya, who also spoke their language,

soon had them both laughing. They didn't cause problems the rest of the night.

One thing Anya noticed was that after a few drinks, people loved to talk, and talk, and talk. At first, she thought it rude to interrupt them to attend another customer. Then she realized that they rarely even noticed, often continuing their rambling to the person next to them.

During the night, Anya received a lot of compliments. There were comments of her beauty, her kindness, her aura—whatever that was. At first these compliments resulted in awkward embarrassment, but soon she learned just to say thank you and brush them off as the inebriated observations that they were.

For a moment, the crowd died down, and Sonya inquired how she was handling everything.

“It's a little strange. In fact, all of this is a little strange,” she admitted. Anya hadn't realized it till now, but her transition was one of incomprehensible magnitude. Sonya cocked her head in question. “I've gone from a slave, isolated from everything and everyone, to surrounded, by people who...I just...I feel...” Feel what? Important? Cared for? Like she mattered, a least a little bit?

Sonya surprised her by drawing her into a tight hug. Anya hugged her back, until an eruption of hoots and hollers in the background made them both laugh and they pulled apart. Then three men caught her eye.

Bastian, Cale, and Marik were here.

Walking to the bar they greeted Anya with smiles. Sebastian spoke first. “We wanted to see how things were going.”

Sonya replied, “We're doing great, right, Anya?”

“Right,” she agreed. “Marik? Who is running the galley?”

“I left out a buffet. They can fend for themselves for a night.”

“Would you like a drink? I've learned how to make a few really...er... somewhat well. How about one of the bottled drinks?” They all smiled at

her. The sight of it warmed her heart like nothing ever had before. She was beginning to care for all of them. Stupid on her part, she knew, but she couldn't seem to help it.

“I'll take a flaming inferno. I've heard good things,” Marik replied.

“Same here.” Both Cale and Bastian said together.

Flaming inferno? No one had ordered that tonight. Anya looked at Sonya for help.

“I'll get them. Marik hasn't tried it yet.” Sonya seemed to imply something with that statement, Anya wasn't sure what. Returning with a bottle, Sonya poured the drinks—a total of five.

Five?

Anya looked around for someone else who might have ordered a drink. Sonya noted her confusion and explained the importance of the act she was about to partake in. An act of trust and friendship. Her heart fluttered. “But I'm working. I don't know how this will affect me.”

“Your shift is nearly over. We'll end it early tonight. You did well. Much better than I imagined. You are indeed a swift learner, Anya.” Sonya raised her glass and the others followed. “To Anya and her future. May it be filled with nothing but happiness.”

Together, they repeated the phrase and swallowed their drinks. With her throat tightening, full of emotion, she took the shot as they had. The burning wasn't so bad, she told herself, and was proud she'd only coughed a little.

After that, Sonya shoved her out from behind the bar, and the boys maneuvered her to a table, then ordered themselves another round of flaming infernos. Anya asked for something a little milder and settled into her seat. She expected they wanted to speak with her about what happened this morning, but no one brought it up. Instead, the conversation took a different path.

“Bastian, how far along are we, do you think?” Marik said, sipping his drink.

“Not as far as I would like. It may benefit us to go through the warring zones, to shave off some time.”

Marik stiffened. “Is that necessary?”

He and Sebastian shared a look. “Considering what you told me earlier, it might be wise.”

Cale waved his hand in dismissal. “We've been through it before with no problems. *Marada* is more than qualified for the challenge.”

“Cale, as I've told you before, too much arrogance can be your downfall.”

Curious, Anya interrupted, “What are the warring zones?”

Sebastian answered, “It's a span of volatile space, where inhabitants are continuously at war for control over territory of a few large mining fields. We've flown through before, undetected, but it's a risk. Any ship we cross paths with could be an enemy.” He paused before continuing, seeming to weigh his next words. “We have all the time we need to deliver the cargo. We could avoid it altogether and go around. What do you think, Anya? Should we risk it to save time?”

Analia stared at him, shocked that he would ask her advice at all, even if he didn't mean to take it. All of them watched, waiting for her answer. Sipping her drink, she thought hard, wanting to give as educated an answer as possible.

Knowing what she did—that Darius might be coming for her—she considered the options. Darius would follow them either way. He had confidence in his ship, the same as Cale had shown just now. He wouldn't hesitate to go through the warring zones if it was convenient. If they did go through the warring zones, there was a higher chance that Darius would be slowed down by attacks. Of course, the same problem applied to them.

“If we choose to go through the warring zones, what are the chances of attack?”

“I'd estimate a thirty to forty percent,” Sebastian replied.

“And what of, say, a larger ship? Would the chances of attack be the same?”

“It's possible that a larger ship would draw more interest. Pirating for supplies is popular. How large are we talking?”

Bastian was hedging for information. Anya knew she was walking a dangerous line. With a thin smile, she replied, “We're talking larger than this ship. Forty percent is a high number. How confident are you, if we *were* to be attacked?”

Cale replied to that, “Very. We have faced hundreds of attacks and defeated every one, many ships larger and more equipped than ours.”

Now she edged for information. “How much more equipped?”

Sebastian responded, “By our calculations many of our opponents harbored weapons that could cause greater damage than ours, but none of them seemed to match our experience, and the experience of our crew. We bested them with our wits, as well as our firepower.”

That certainly didn't apply to Darius. Darius knew the capabilities of *Extarga* and how to exploit it. His weapons were the best, and often it took only one shot to bring an opponent down.

Anya took a moment to weigh every option versus every outcome. “I think it would be worth it to go through the warring zones.”

While Sebastian pursed his lips, the other two took on a grave expression. They'd read through the lines. It didn't matter what any of them were thinking at this moment—most likely that she had put them all in danger by merely being here—she ignored the guilt. There was nothing she could do about it now. She felt her conclusion would keep them safe... or at least safer than if Darius were to catch them.

Cale replied in a drab tone, “Interesting Anya. How ever did you come to that conclusion?”

She shrugged and lied through her teeth. “What convinced me was your confidence, Cale. You seem very sure that no harm would come to us. So why shouldn't we take the shortcut?”

Cale snorted and swallowed the last of his drink, but didn't comment.

Marik changed the subject. “How did you like working the bar, Anya?”

Beaming, Anya replied, “It's a lot of work, a lot to remember. Sonya is amazing at it. I think, once I get the hang of it, I should be fine.” She smirked. “Till then, be wary of my mixed drinks.”

They all laughed at that.

Sonya stopped by the table to refill their glasses, winking at Anya before moving to the next table.

Together, the three males sucked down their drinks, while Anya sipped her still full glass of whatever it was. Marik commented. “We've been, what? Nearly a month into the journey? The crew seems to be reacting fine to being cooped up.”

“So far there have been no incidents,” Sebastian replied.

Anya was once again curious. “What kind of incidents would you expect?”

“It's been proven that when people are cooped up in the same space, or isolated for long periods of time they tend to go stir-crazy and begin to act abnormally toward others or their surroundings.”

“Oh.” She suddenly felt uncomfortable with this topic. Her own experiences have shown proof of his claim.

She remembered the vision of the old man, materializing before her, and sometimes speaking—at the time she thought it nonsense—about her becoming free one day. But now that she thought of it, it wasn't nonsense after all. She was free. Whether she held on to her freedom, remained to be seen.

Absently, she said, “But this is nothing like isolation. Your people are together, talking and laughing, and working. There are rooms dedicated to entertainment and exercise. There is so much to do here. This feels nothing like being isolated.”

“Some people might not see it your way. Some would get easily bored without seeing new sights or meeting new people.”

She rolled her eyes at that. “Honestly, if I can go decades without even seeing the stars, anyone should be able to handle a few months without the luxury of new sights or people.”

“They kept you *that* isolated?” Marik replied.

Dammit! She was doing that damn talking-without-thinking thing again.

“That's why everything seems so new to you?” Sebastian’s tone went empty, but his grip tightened around his glass.

Cale said nothing, but his expression had gone dark.

Sonya unwittingly saved her by joining then and plopping down on an empty chair. “I'm closing up shop, you guys want anything else?”

“Yes,” the three replied in a nearly unified voice.

Anya stood, taking their gazes with her. “Not me. I'm tired,” she said, using the opportunity for escape. “I'll see you in the morning, Cale.”

CHAPTER 10



*A*nya entered her room.

On the way from the pub, she'd wondered at Sebastian's next scheme. Perhaps he'd ripped up the floor of her room, or flooded it. She expected almost anything...except what she found.

A large mustard colored couch stood in place of the old one.

Running her hand along the back, she found it was soft and looked as though new. Bewildered, she tested the cushions, burrowing her body into their softness. The plushy fabric formed neatly to her curves.

Why he'd done this, she didn't know. At the moment she didn't care. Like a siren's call, the softness of the couch was lulling her to lie her body down. She was exhausted from the day's events. Every muscle screamed at her, and her emotions were still a little raw.

During training, when she tapped into her anger, her mind lost control and threatened to delve into madness from the wretchedness of her memories. As always, she was tempted to embrace the madness, but, as always, something was there to keep her from it.

This time it was Bastian. He'd held her tight, enveloping her in his comforting strength and masculine scent. All she could do was hold on to

him until the turmoil inside her abated. His muscular arms drew her to him, warming her, pulling her out of her insanity, making her feel safe.

When she was fully herself again, embarrassment had flooded her. Had there been pity in their eyes? She didn't want their pity. She wanted them to think of her as strong and capable. Like someone who could take care of herself.

She wanted to see herself that way too.

That's why she would continue to train with Cale, not because Bastian ordered her to, but because it would benefit *her* in the end. She would learn all she could, and would never lose control as she did today.

Her body ached, and her lids grew heavy. Before she passed out, she forced herself into the shower to let the warm water relax her further.

The kindness everyone was showing her was overwhelming, filling her up with so much appreciation and gratitude, until she overflowed with it.

She suspected Bastian knew the dangerous position she'd put them in, and still he was kind to her. Was even allowing her training so she could one day defend herself, as well as a job that would bring her money after she left *Marada*. Why was he giving her so much when she could give nothing in return, besides a constant threat to all of their lives? The guilt sat like a clump of iron in the pit of her stomach.

Showered and dressed, Anya reentered her room. Steam poured from the bathroom, dissipating into nothingness. The contrast of the cooler air slammed into her, and she rushed to curl up on the couch, blanket and pillow in place.

This new couch was much larger than the previous one, allowing her to stretch out fully instead of scrunched up like on the old one. Sinking in, Anya let herself drift.

Once again, Anya woke to a darkened room. Lifting herself from the couch, she scouted for Sebastian. The room was empty, and no dark shadows loomed ominously in the corners. Disappointment gripped her. She was hoping to thank him.

Ignoring the pang of wistfulness, she prepared to meet Cale in the training room. She made her way past the nursery. Beautiful mixtures of smells and energy licked at her skin. The lively vegetation from within called to her. With only a quick peek inside, she walked past.

Cale was standing in the same spot as yesterday. Anya smiled and greeted him warmly. He only nodded, which she thought, for him, was like a twirling-hug-embrace.

“We're going to practice some of the holds from yesterday. Don't hold back. Try as hard as you can to get free.”

Shooting past her guard for the umpteenth time, Cale was behind her in an instant. His arm wrapped tightly around her neck. He squeezed, *hard*. The strength of his grip told her that he wasn't going to hold back either. After a moment of hesitation, Anya found his foot with her heel.

He stumbled back, taking her with him, but showed no other signs of discomfort. He still had a tight hold on her neck. Stomping again she caught his toe, then immediately elbowed him in the stomach.

Still he held tight.

“You're not trying. Do I have to give you some incentive?” His grip tightened, cutting off her lungs. Gasping for air, her heart lurched. Cale wasn't playing. Had he decided that she was a liability? As she struggled and clawed at his arm, Cale's voice remained calm. “Keep your wits, think logically. You only have a minute or two before the lack of air will cause you to pass out, precious moments to make a quick lifesaving decision. Just keep your focus and think.”

She couldn't breathe! *That* was all she could think about. Distressed, she struggled harder, fighting for air.

Think.

Cale's words from yesterday echoed in her head. *Bring a man to his knees.*

He would be expecting it, though.

She felt the slow leaking of darkness fill her as her lungs screamed in her chest. Raising her leg, Anya feigned another kick to his foot. He took the bait. While he was focused on moving his foot, she crashed her fist back as hard as she could. It worked better than she had anticipated.

Cale's grip fell away, allowing her to fling her body out of his reach. He'd fallen to one knee and visibly struggled for breath, clutching himself. Anya heaved, sucking in air as hard as she could. Her vision began to clear. Cale's agony came into view.

In a fit of regret, she dropped beside him. "I'm sorry."

He ground out, "Why are you apologizing? I was strangling you. You did as I asked. Nice move, by the way." His scowl and grating tone contradicted the compliment.

"Thank you. I don't like hurting people who have been nice to me."

"Then why would you feel bad about hurting me?" He stood as though he had recovered, but Anya could still sense his pain. His voice had lowered to a deep matter-of-fact tone. "I've shown you no kindness."

"Yes you have. Maybe the least of anyone here, but still...in your own way, you and everyone on this ship has shown me more compassion than I've ever known. I am so...it's...too much sometimes. Overwhelms me."

Cale pinned her with a heavy stare.

"Besides, you're teaching me to defend myself. No matter if you are awful to me for the rest of my time here, that is something I will forever be grateful for."

During her speech, he had become quiet, unreadable. Void of emotion.
Do all demons have that ability?

“Next you'll learn some combination moves,” he said, as if he hadn't heard a word she'd just spoken. Analia had a feeling this was his way of keeping people at a distance. His energy said he wanted to remain closed off from those around him, almost dead to the world.

For most of her life, that was what she wanted too. Many times she had been able to recede into the back of her mind, often feeling completely detached from her body, while life continued without her. For weeks, sometimes months, she could stay that way—unfeeling and, in a way, free. But, unfortunately, not forever. She always came back to reality.

Pushing her thoughts away, Analia faced Cale, waiting for the next lesson.

This damn endless space.

Marada was moving at a steady pace. Soon they would be approaching the warring zones.

After Anya had offered her preference for the warring zones, Sebastian knew he needed to be on guard for whoever might come after her. He almost wanted them to come, so he could destroy them thoroughly and with much pain. But this job, which he now regretted taking, was like an ever-present burden he couldn't get rid of quick enough. It was taking too long and stealing precious time he could be using to find Anya a safe place to hide while he hunted down those who would do her harm.

No one in, no one out. Fucking wards.

It would be months before he could track down the male whose guts he wanted to squish between his fingers. Whose pulse he wanted to feel quicken with fear before it faded into agony. Whose pleas for mercy he wanted to laugh at before he ripped his head from his neck.

Soon.

Whoever this person was had kept Anya isolated, treating her only gods know how. Not as she should be treated, that he knew for sure. Somehow, amazingly, she remained kind and gentle. How she could be, after the life she led, he didn't know. She should be jaded and full of deep-seated rage like Marik had been. Like Marik still was.

Of course, deep down, Anya did have some rage. Cale had been so shocked by her outburst that he seemed at a loss of what to do, backing away from a fight for the first time ever.

Sebastian chuckled at that. Cale will never live it down, as far as Sebastian was concerned.

But then she'd collapsed, utterly consumed by her sorrow. She'd looked so fragile. Sebastian had been able to do nothing but hold her as tight as he could in an unpracticed attempt at providing comfort. She had stiffened in his arms as though the gesture was foreign to her as well; most likely it was. But after a moment, she'd softened and leaned into him. Holding her like that, feeling her in his arms, instantly became as natural as breathing. In that moment, he thought he could have held her forever.

Thinking of her now made him wonder what she might be doing. A glance at the time told him she'd be training with Cale.

Should I be there?

"Captain," Aidan called, interrupting his thought. "We've crossed over. We are officially within the warring zone."

Sebastian refocused his thoughts. His crew was counting on him to keep them safe. He needed his mind on the task at hand. "Keep all sensors

open for approaching ships,” Sebastian replied. “All weapons remain online at all times until we pass through.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Engage shields, full power. Aidan, get us the fuck through this quickly and untouched.”

“Got it, Captain.”

Aidan was the ship’s lead pilot, and a damn good one at that. Such a young male, yet his skills were that of a veteran three times his age. He was a descendant of the dragon clans, and nearly all dragons had an affinity for flight. Aidan had made a name for himself by navigating Phase Nine when he was only in his twenties.

Phase Nine was a racing competition created by the twelve allied planets. Anyone from any race was invited to enter for the glory and honor of their people. The obstacles were deadly, and everyone who entered knew for certain that not all would return alive. Aidan not only returned, but he had been declared the winner.

His win had been bittersweet, however. Aidan's wife and child had been slaughtered in a random act of violence while he was away. He hadn't learned of the tragedy until he returned home in victory.

Aidan never raced again, but the only thing he knew was flying, so he'd eventually found his way to *Marada*. Sebastian was grateful for his presence. There was no one better to get them through this long journey. And long it would be. Especially if he exiled himself from Anya as he planned to. Perhaps the less he saw of her, the less she would occupy his thoughts. But how long could he avoid the blue-eyed temptress?

Analia was almost finished with her shift. Marik was busy in the galley with three full tables of orders she'd given him. Over the last few days he'd shown concern for her, questioning her about each session with Cale. Every day, she reassured him that she was fine and the training was going well.

Sebastian didn't appear in her room again. Nor did he attend lunch or indulge in a drink. In fact, she hadn't seen him since that night at the bar. Now that she was settled in, he was leaving her to the care of the other three demons.

Many people continued to pour into the salon. However, the invasive interrogations had eased, melding seamlessly into the pleasures of idle chitchat. The two young girls, Spectra and Edenya, often came to share gossip with her. They loved to speak of the many places they'd visited in their lives, and would repeat the names of planets or space cities she should visit. Anya would smile and listen with politeness and assured them she would try her best to go everywhere they suggested, knowing she most likely never would.

It didn't matter if there were a thousand perfect places in the universe, she only needed one. One perfect...home.

Xandar entered the salon and waved at her. A crafty grin curled his lips. He motioned with his head for her to join him as he claimed an empty table.

"Hello, Anya. How is your day going?" he asked, eyes sparkling.

"It's going just fine. What would you like to order? Marik has been working on a slow-cooked roast for today. It is very excellent."

"I actually didn't come here for lunch. I came to ask you if you would be my date for a party that's coming up."

She searched her memory for his meaning. Date, she knew, meant a specific day. A party was a celebration. She'd never been to one before. His phrasing perplexed her.

Her confusion must have been visible because he reiterated, "I mean, I would like you to accompany me to the party, as my date."

"Date," she repeated. "Meaning, to join you in celebration?"

"Yes." He paused. "Well, sort of. There's a little more to it than that."

She waited expectantly.

He scratched the back of his neck. A nervous reaction? "Well, we would spend the evening together talking and maybe dancing. There would be drinks and food and we would get to know each other better."

Dancing? "I have never danced." Though she had always wanted to.

"That's okay. We don't have to dance. I'm not much of a dancer myself."

"No, I would like to dance."

"Then we'll dance." His grin was catching. "All night, if you want."

Anya laughed. "Okay, I'll go with you to this celebration. When is it to take place?"

"A few days, I think. I'll let you know when I find out for sure." He rushed from the room before she could ask any more questions.

Shrugging, she entered the galley to clean a little before she left for the pub. "Marik, have you ever been a...date? Or is that only a word for a female?"

Marik went tense and turned to her with a questioning look. "It's a general term. Why are you asking?"

"Xandar said there's to be a celebration, and he asked me to be his date."

He raised an eyebrow. "How the hell does he know? It hasn't even been announced." Cursing under his breath, Marik shook his head. "That little shit must have overheard..." Trailing off, he pinned her with a glare. "Did you say yes?"

She cocked her head. "Did I make a mistake?"

"No. No you didn't do anything wrong."

Analía didn't believe him. He looked worried. She opened her mouth to inquire more, but he quickly shooed her out the door.

"I'll finish up here. You should get to the pub. Ask Sonya for date advice. I don't have all that much experience to offer."

"Sonya has experience?"

"Uh..." He shrugged. "Doesn't matter, she'd still have better advice for you than I would."

Anya didn't understand, but she went anyway. Marik's agitation seemed to grow the longer she stayed. She couldn't fathom what her mistake had been. Perhaps Sonya could enlighten her.

As Sonya filled drink orders, she happily replied to Anya's question. At first she'd been startled that Anya was asking about dating, but then she felt relieved that Bastian had finally accepted his attraction to the girl.

"A date can be a lot of things. People go on dates to get to know each other, or to find a connection, or to just be with the other person because you're attracted to them. Sometimes you get dressed up, depending on the occasion." After lining up four shot glasses, Sonya filled them in one clean swoop. She loved her job. "Why are you asking about this? Did someone ask you out?" she prodded, expecting to get all the details about the way Sebastian had asked Anya.

"Xandar asked me to be his date..."

Sonya slammed the bottle on the bar, eyes riveted to the brimming shot glasses. "Did he?" That little bastard must have overheard her scheme. She had suggested to the others that they throw a party for Anya, explaining

that Anya had never celebrated a birthday, had probably never celebrated anything. Their natural male reactions were shrugs, grumbling, and finally compliance.

“Marik was unhappy about this as well. Why?” Anya asked.

“Oh, hon, we're not unhappy. We're just surprised, I guess.” And a little worried, Sonya added to herself. Bastian was going to go ballistic when he heard. “Do you like Xandar?”

Anya shrugged. “He's been kind. I still don't understand, though. I have spent an evening here with Xandar. What is the difference?”

Sonya thought it was best to be as blunt as possible. “That wasn't a date. Guys tend to expect things during, or after, a date. He might just hold your hand, or try for a kiss. Or, he might be hoping to get into your pants.”

Anya looked considerate for a moment. “Get into my pants?” Then her eyes widened. “And if I refuse?”

“You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. Just make it clear to him if you want him to keep his distance. Remember, you're the one in control. You say what happens, and what doesn't.”

Anya was turning a sickly shade of green.

“Are you okay?”

“This is more significant than I thought.”

“Listen, we'll all be there. You won't be left alone. Everyone on the ship will be there, and over half would be willing to kill the man if he tries anything funny.”

Sonya wasn't even exaggerating. Anya had a way of enchanting everyone she met. She had a warmth and a brightness about her that couldn't be ignored. Marik was already treating her with the same big-brother-like affection that he bestowed on Sonya. Most shocking, Calic was becoming less irritable than usual. He would sometimes come into the pub, after their training session, to gloat about Anya's progress.

Sebastian's growing protectiveness was something to worry about, where Xandar's safety was concerned. Hopefully the man had a little more sense than to try anything with Anya. Sonya didn't know Xandar well enough to be sure of his character. He'd only joined *Marada* a few years ago.

“So, how does it work?” Anya interrupted her thoughts.

“How does what work?”

“A date. Xandar said we would spend the evening together and maybe dance. Is that it?”

“Well he'll probably want to walk you there. I would think anyway. He might offer to bring you a drink, or something,” Sonya stumbled. She'd never really been on a date herself. “You would sit at the same table and talk. At the end, he'll probably want to walk with you back to your room. That's the part you have to watch out for. That's when he might lean in for a kiss. If you want him to kiss you, then you'll let him.” She hoped for Sebastian's sake she didn't. “If not, then just say good night and duck into your room quickly.”

Anya was silent for a moment. “And I am in charge?”

“Yup, what you say, goes.”

Anya woke the next morning a little sluggish. She had worried all night about the date. She understood now that Xandar was asking to start a relationship. She didn't know how to feel about that. He was kind, but she didn't feel anything for him. His eyes didn't draw her in. His scent, though nice, didn't make her heart race.

As long as she could remember, she'd yearned for someone who would love her, someone she could love. But was she even ready for a relationship?

Her slavery already seemed like a dark memory, but she hadn't been free for very long. How long should she wait before allowing herself to live? She wanted to experience everything life had to offer. Though she was a little nervous, she was also excited to try dating, kissing, maybe even more—with the right person.

Sebastian's face flashed in her mind, and her stomach tightened. She imagined what it would be like to dance with him. What would it be like to be kissed by him? At that thought, her heart sped and her skin grew warm. As a test, Anya imagined what it would be like to kiss Xandar.

She felt nothing.

The date of the celebration had been announced and was scheduled four days from now. She considered rescinding her acceptance to go with Xandar, but decided to honor her commitment, though she promised to tell him that she wanted to remain friends.

Her days were becoming routine. Mornings with Cale learning defense, and every now and again he would show her some attack moves. Afternoons with Marik and the lunch crowd. She was enjoying trying every new dish Marik created. It was quickly becoming one of her favorite things to do. Evenings with Sonya, who was giving her lots of advice on how to manage people, males in particular. Out of control, drunken males were Sonya's specialty.

Though Sonya had admittedly never dated in her life, she still held a vastness of information. Anya soaked up every word.

Sonya described the male ego as fragile, their competitive streak fierce. If left unchecked, some could become controlling and overbearing. In the case of demons, they were protective to a fault, especially where loved ones were concerned.

Sonya admitted the extent of her knowledge came from watching her brothers and other males on the ship, and that her interpretation of men was loose at best.

When she wasn't working, Anya would spend her free time exploring the ship, learning the layout. Sonya's room, she found, was just around the corner from hers. Most rooms, in fact, were located on the same floor as hers, or one floor below. The control room was two floors above. Aside from the elevators, stairwells were also available, but no one seemed to use them.

She would sometimes visit the training room and practice on her own. She wanted to be strong, and strove to impress her teacher, as well as Sebastian, if she ever saw him again.

Marik told her they had entered the warring zones, and Sebastian was spending much of his time on duty, only stopping in for dinner near closing time.

Anya worried about the warring zones and kept her fingers crossed that it was the right path to take. She felt a little guilty about her opinion on the subject. Surely she hadn't swayed Sebastian's decision on the matter.

The fact that Sebastian only came in for one meal a day gave her concern. Marik informed her that everyone working in the control room was pulling double shifts. And with Cale training her, Sebastian was often working longer hours too.

Guilt swelled inside her and seemed to be making a permanent home in the pit of her stomach. Not only had she taken Cale away from an important job, they were going through an aggressive area of space, which was putting the ship at risk every second. Not to mention, her mere presence was a danger to everyone.

"There must be something I can do. Since they can't come here, couldn't I bring some food to the control room? So they can at least eat lunch?"

Marik nodded with approval. "That's a great idea." He pulled a rolling cart from a closet and filled it with a variety of foods. "You know where to go?"

"Yes. I'll be quick about it."

"Don't worry. I've survived years without you. I can manage for a little while." Marik's smile lifted her heart.

With that, she headed off, far too eager, if she were being honest, to see the ship's captain.

It was only the second time Anya had been in the control room, and she was awed anew as the great domed window, darkened by space, came into view.

The room was full of people, with every console occupied. Sebastian sat to her right at the command center. As if sensing her, his head snapped up, mouth parted in surprise. His amber gaze was intense as ever. Anya stifled a shiver as the energy of it flowed through her. Then, noticing the cart of food, he nodded with approval, but didn't say a word.

The sweet smell of Marik's cuisine consumed the room, making many heads turn to find the source. Some shouted with glee and hurried over to grab what they could.

"Anya, you're a lifesaver," one of the men called. She thought his name was Jackson, or maybe James.

The feeling of genuine usefulness filled Anya with satisfaction. "Come and take whatever you like. I'll be bringing a lunch cart everyday around this time." Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Sebastian. He was unreadable, as usual, and showed no intention of taking the food she offered.

Maybe if she gave him some room, he'd grab a bite or two. She really wanted to get a closer look at the control room anyway. Beyond the large window was a colorful array of space dust gathered in tight clumps. A

small star in the middle illuminated the tiny grains into a mist of multicolored hues. “That's beautiful,” she muttered.

A man sitting close to her commented, “That's one of the mining clusters.”

She eyed the man thoroughly. He was tall and of strong build. The majority of his attention was on the console in front of him. “What is your job?” she asked, ever curious.

He glanced at her, caught slightly off guard by her question. “I monitor and distribute the ship's power supply. From the lights to the engine, I allocate the amount of energy used in each area and divert it to areas that need more power at certain times.”

Kind of like what she used to do. Only she didn't *monitor* the power of the ship, she supplied it. “Do you mind if I watch you for a bit?”

Her request delighted him. Straightening his posture, he replied, “Not at all. Look as long as you like. My name is Nikolai, by the way. Nick, for short. I don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting you yet.”

“It's nice to meet you, Nick. I'm Anya. Tell me, does this ship have warp drive?” It was something she'd contemplated during long nights full of worry. If the Hell Ship showed, the only way she could conceive of a clean escape was through warp drive. The Hell Ship could only warp for about ten or eleven seconds before too much of the energy was consumed. *Marada* was smaller than the *Extarga*, which would give it the freedom to use less energy and the ability to go farther.

“Unfortunately, we've never been able to get the warp drive working. I'm sure there's something wrong with the code, but I can't figure it out.”

Damn.

“I've always wondered how warp works. You said it uses a code?” She knew how it worked, but she needed to lead him into showing her the code.

“Well, when it's functioning properly, warp uses a ton of energy, so, on most ships, it's hardly ever used. It's pretty complicated. The short version

is that there's a specific algorithm programmed into the ship that sets things into motion. The algorithm is different for most ships, depending on engine type and the size of the ship.”

“Algorithm? Is it possible for me to see what it looks like?”

“Sure, but you won't understand it.” He flicked a few buttons and a string of digits and letters appeared.

“Is this the algorithm for the warp drive?” She knew it wasn't.

“No, this is one of the simpler algorithms.” A few more clicks of the keyboard and the screen switched. “This is the warp.”

She quickly browsed the code. It was indeed different from the Hell Ship, but within seconds she spotted the mistake. Only a few numbers out of place and the entire system was useless. She filed the information away, hoping she would never need to use it. “Hmm, that does look complicated.”

“Not when you learn how to read the code. Only, this one has me stumped.”

“Keep trying, I'm sure you'll figure it out.”

He smiled at her encouragement. “Have you heard about the party coming up?” he suddenly asked. Anya nodded. “I just thought, if no one has asked you, I would love to go with you.”

A little stunned, she gave him a grateful smile. “I'm sorry, I'm going with Xandar. From what I've learned, one shouldn't agree to more than one date per night.”

Nick gave a hearty thick laugh that shook his shoulders. At the same time, Anya noticed Sebastian's head jerk in their direction.

“I figured someone had already asked you, but I thought it wouldn't hurt to try. Maybe next time.”

She nodded and began to move freely around the rest of the room, eagerly learning everyone's name and job. Being constantly surrounded by and interacting with people, Anya was learning there was another side to

her gift. She seemed to be unintentionally reading the emotions of others. Nick had been genuinely happy. After meeting Aidan, the pilot, she felt his energy was...mournful? He hid it well, though.

Then she focused on Sebastian who seemed to be in turmoil, almost angry. Was it because she was here? Did he want her to stay away from him? Is that why she hadn't seen him for days?

Marryelli, the navigator—a tall blond woman with almost feline-like features—called out coordinates, and the crew fell into a steady rhythm.

Deciding she'd been here long enough, Anya returned to the cart, which was now nearly empty. Sebastian, she noticed, hadn't taken anything. "Captain?" she called. His eyes darted to her. "Would you like something before I leave?"

The look he gave told her that what he wanted wasn't on the cart. When he moved toward her, she suddenly felt like prey in the path of a predator. With his eyes locked on hers, Sebastian leaned in close and snatched a sandwich. She couldn't stifle a shiver as his body came closer and his gaze dipped to her lips.

Then he seemed to snap out of it. "Thank you. My crew appreciates your service." With that, Sebastian returned to his station.

A mixture of emotions followed her out of the room. Half in a daze, and oddly giddy, she pushed the cart forward until she reached the galley once again.

Marik greeted her and asked how it went. He had never provided an a-la-carte service before and was visibly excited about it. Anya was too, and couldn't wait to go back the next day.

The energy of Sebastian's emotion had confused her, and she wanted another chance to figure him out. At first, she felt his surprise at her entrance, which turned into agitation as she interacted with the crew. But it was the lust in the end that almost knocked her off her feet.

Why so many emotions so quickly?

Sonya had told her that demon's emotions were naturally intense. Was that it? Or was there more to it?

She needed to understand. And if he wouldn't come to her, then she would go to him.

The end of her shift came swiftly and she started toward the pub. When she came near the plant nursery, she couldn't resist stopping in the doorway. The energy of the room seemed stronger today than it had yesterday. She could smell the life pouring from the doorway. It tingled her skin. Leaning in, she inhaled the sweet air.

"You can come in if you want," a familiar accent called from within the room. Anya peeked around the corner and spotted the woman with her glorious tattoo of blue and green shades. "Come in, little Analia."

Hesitating. "I was told these plants are extremely valuable."

"Indeed, they are rare and hard to come by." The woman waved her forward. "Come in, come in."

She reluctantly obeyed and was immediately engulfed. The tingling in her skin grew over her whole body. The energy flowed through her leisurely. Anya caught herself smiling and schooled her features.

"I am Raka."

"It's nice to see you again. May I ask why these plants are here? They are beautiful, but what is the purpose on a ship?"

"They help to clean the air and provide peace to those on board."

Anya cocked her head. "Peace?"

"Have you not visited the Sanctuary?"

Anya shook her head, intrigued, but a brightly colored flower caught her attention. She moved to get a closer look. The flower's thick stem rose through a forest of bright green leaves. Countless petals decorated the head with colors fading from yellow at the center to deep red near the ends. Small tendrils peeked out from the center, donning yellow balls of fluff. The scent was indescribable as it filled her nostrils.

“Would you like it?” Raka asked.

“What?”

Before Anya could protest, Raka snipped the flower from the plant and handed it to her. Shocked into silence, Anya took the stem. While gazing at the beautiful mixture of colors, she wondered what Sebastian would think if he saw her with this flower. He'd threatened her with a life of servitude if she disturbed the plants in this room.

A wave of sickness rippled through her.

As if her thoughts had summoned him, Sebastian appeared behind her, leaning against the door with an odd expression on his face. Her stomach lurched into her throat. She gulped down a ball of air as the stem dropped from her grasp. In a panic, she pushed her way past him and raced for the pub without a backward glance.

She hadn't meant to take the flower. She only wanted to look. What was Raka thinking, snipping the flower like that? Clearly, Anya couldn't be held responsible.

Safely behind the bar, she nervously busied herself. A drink here and there. She hardly noticed. Her thoughts were jumbled. Sonya kept asking if everything was okay, and she could only nod in response. It took several hours for her to calm enough to notice Sebastian hadn't followed her to demand reparation. Anya didn't know what to make of it.

When her shift ended, she didn't want to leave, knowing Sebastian might be waiting for her. And though, at any other time, the thought might have caused a flutter in her stomach, now she was reluctant, fearful of his anger.

Why did she take the flower? What would possess her to do such a thing?

With nowhere else to go in the late hours of the night, Anya took her time walking back to her room. She stood outside her door for many minutes, gathering her courage. Finally, she entered.

Darkness greeted her. Lights flared as she called them to life, and she found the room empty. A shimmer of color drew her attention to the coffee table.

The flower! Sitting in a slim vase half filled with water.

Cautiously, she surveyed the room. Nothing else was out of place. No sign of Sebastian. She peeked back out into the hallway. There was no one there.

Truly confused, she sank into the couch watching the flower with puzzlement. Its petals seemed to glow in the dim light. She stared at it until her eyelids grew heavy. Eventually she found herself curled on the couch, drifting into slumber.

CHAPTER 11



Anya woke with a stretch and a yawn; another night of deep, satisfying sleep. She allowed herself to linger in the warm cocoon made by the blankets and cushions. It seemed she couldn't get enough of their softness.

When she opened her eyes, she was filled with euphoria as the vase and its vibrant counterpart came into view. Overnight, the bloom had flourished. A drowsy grin fluttered around her lips.

Had Sebastian put it there last night? Or had it been Raka? The euphoric feeling drifted away.

Please let it have been Sebastian.

Rising, she leaned forward sniffing in the sweet scent. The pungent aroma filled her nostrils and enveloped her senses. Over the years, she'd heard rumors of the smells of flowers. Until now, she had never even seen one that she could recall. It was all cold metal and empty dark rooms for her.

No longer.

With what Anya could only describe as giddiness, she showered and dressed, taking another moment to appreciate the flower's beauty before tearing herself away. Calic would kill her if she was late. The door glided

open at her approach. A pair of heavy black boots came into view. Anya froze in midstep, taking in the rest of the hefty body.

Sebastian was standing casually against the wall, arms crossed over his chest. Horns peeked out of black-as-night hair. Deep golden eyes trained on her. He wore a short sleeved shirt, revealing thick arms rippling with muscle. Just below that was a pair of what had to be the best fitting pants ever made. He was like a god. His energy screamed confidence coupled with lethal danger. His lips twitched at her gaping and she closed her jaw, which had fallen open without her permission.

Pushing away from the wall, Sebastian dropped his arms to his side. "I've cleared your schedule for today."

Ire pricked at her. "Why?" Because of the flower?

She was getting sick of the anticipation of punishment. "It wasn't my fault. Raka cut the flower and gave it to me. I didn't ask her to do it. She just did. I shouldn't..."

"This isn't about the flower. Well, it is, but it isn't what you think."

"You have no idea what I think."

"You're right. I don't. And that's maddening." He paused, shaking his head. "I put the flower in your room to set you at ease. You looked a little freaked out when you ran away like that. And in the pub you were hardly there, like your mind was elsewhere."

In the pub? She hadn't even known Sebastian had been there. She watched him warily. At the same time her heart jumped at his admission. It was he who gave her the flower.

"It took me a while to figure out why you reacted that way when you saw me. I didn't mean to scare you like that." His gaze traveled her body. "I have something I want to show you. You can change out of your sparring clothes. You won't be training today."

"Something you want to show me?"

"Yes. It's a surprise, so don't ask. I'll wait out here while you change."

Anya couldn't get a read on him. His body language was guarded, his mask in place. He was so controlled. In his own words, it was maddening. She stepped back into her room, wondering what she should change into. He claimed she'd done nothing wrong and was, therefore, safe from punishment. Almost uncaringly, he'd revealed he had put the flower in her room, as if it were nothing. As if it wasn't one of the greatest—if not one of the only—gifts she'd ever received. His stoicism was irritating.

Suddenly, she had the urge to *make* him lose some of that control, and an idea formed in her mind. What was wrong with her? She was about to rile the beast, and she wasn't even afraid.

Sebastian's jaw hit the floor when he saw her in her fresh change of clothes.

She was dressed in one of the black miniskirts, heels to match. The shirt she'd donned was low cut spaghetti strap that clung to her curves and made his cock instantly solid as steel. He bit back a groan and fought the urge to push her back into the room and show her just what she was doing to him.

Her eyes flashed with mischief, and realization hit him. She knew exactly what she was doing to him.

Wicked female!

Quickly he schooled his features. She had no idea the fire with which she was playing.

Not trusting his tongue to obey him, he started down the corridor. Anya fell in step beside him.

“Where are you taking me?”

“I told you not to ask.” His lips quirked. She just rolled her eyes at him.

Yesterday in the nursery she had been so fascinated by the plants and flowers, as though she'd never seen anything like it. It was possible she hadn't. Sebastian chided himself for causing her distress and unknowingly keeping her from something that might bring her happiness.

Had he known his words would affect her so, he never would have told her to keep clear of the nursery. It's true the plants were difficult to come by—many of them are rare even to their originating planets—but not impossible. Raka had a way with plants, and since she'd been with the crew all have flourished under her care.

Anya had held such a look of contentment and sheer awe as she perused the different foliage. It made his heart swell with pride that he had such a room to offer her. He couldn't wait to show her the Sanctuary. If flowers and plants could make Anya smile like that, he'd be sure she had access to all the flowers she could possibly want.

They walked together in a comfortable silence, a complete one-eighty from their first meeting. Back then, she had been tense, cold, and locked inside a protective shell. Now her shell was cracking, and she was growing more comfortable with the ship, the crew, even him, even though he hadn't treated her as delicately as he should have in the beginning. But how was he to know the kindhearted avid creature she would turn out to be? Her ability to adapt so quickly to her new life amazed him.

The doors to the Sanctuary slid open, and he couldn't resist turning to gauge her reaction.

Eyes widening, she stumbled. She caught herself, and came to a halt. Her breath hitched. "My gods."

Sebastian swelled with satisfaction. Taking her hand, he pulled her through the threshold. Her grip was weak, resting lightly in his, but the contact affected him more than he imagined it could, and once they were fully in the room he couldn't let her go.

Anya was enthralled by her surroundings and probably didn't even notice he was touching her. In awe, she scanned the room. It was a beautiful space to be sure, but Anya shamed it with her very presence.

He managed to avert his attention, surveying the room, trying to see through her eyes. This was the largest open space in the ship, and for good reason. Bright lights shone from the ceiling, mimicking solar rays. All kinds of foliage encompassed the room, from exotic trees that reached for the ceiling to colorful shrubs and grass that covered sloping mounds of turf.

Vines blanketed the walls so that almost no metal was visible. A faux stream trickled, snaking around the low hills. A pathway crossed the stream at three points, circling the circumference of the room, providing access to thick, jungle-like areas.

The air was different here. Sweet, with a tang of life, burying the cold iron and steel of the ship. And the colors. Every color in the spectrum existed in this room. It was a haven for everyone on the ship. In this room, he could almost imagine he was back on his home planet. Almost.

Her grip tightened and she looked at him with so much emotion it made his heart clench. He tried to look away, but she'd captured him completely. "Is this real?"

He nodded. "All of it."

"Can I touch it?"

"You can touch anything you want," he said in a voice that gave two meanings. She didn't notice. Good. "We call this the Sanctuary."

Too soon, she removed her hand from his and began to flutter back and forth among the vegetation, scenting every flower and touching each one in turn. Each time she stretched for something out of reach, the hem of her skirt would rise ever so slightly, revealing soft milky thighs. Sebastian had to stifle a groan. He should leave her to browse on her own, but he couldn't keep from following behind her as she made her way down the path.

She glided over a low bridge that crossed the stream and into a small thicket of trees. The trunks were thin, with many of them clustered together. Vines dangled from the treetops, and small bushes crowded the area.

Seeing her there, among the greenery, full of elation, silky golden locks swishing back and forth as her gaze darted, was more than he could take. Unable to stop himself, Sebastian began stalking toward her. As though Anya sensed the change in him, she twirled to face him. She swallowed and inched backward.

Could she tell he'd lost his control? Was she frightened?

With that, he halted, almost able to rein it in.

Then her eyes went silver and his small measure of control shattered.

With a groan, he grabbed her by the waist and claimed her mouth with his. At his touch, her body stiffened. With a gentleness he hadn't known he was capable of, he traced the contours of her lips with his own, taking in her delicious scent. After a moment, she relaxed into him, her lips softening.

Through the fog, Sebastian noted her reaction. She was giving in to him. When her hands came up to rest on his shoulders, another chunk of his control snapped away. His kiss became demanding. He licked across her lips with his tongue. She gasped and he took advantage, delving into her mouth to find her tongue with his own.

A soft feminine sound escaped her and she began to meet him with every sweep of his tongue. Her arms latched around his neck as she pushed her body deeper into his. This was not the reaction he expected, but he'd take it. With light force, he pushed her up against a tree and pressed his body hard into her soft curves, never relinquishing her mouth. Moving the material of her skirt, he squeezed the soft flesh of her ass. Groaning with male appreciation, his hips began rocking against her.

She made another soft moan that drove him to the brink of insanity.

The kiss became frenzied, as though both were starved for each other. Sebastian knew he needed to pull away and get the hell out of there before...before what? He was right where he wanted to be. Squeezing her taut backside, he ground against her, mindless with lust for her. His shaft had hardened to the point of pain, and all he could think of was how it would feel to slip inside her warm flesh. Would she let him? He wanted to feel her writhing beneath him, to feel her sheath clench around his shaft as he pumped into her, again and again, until she screamed with ecstasy.

He broke away from her, tightening his hold on what little restraint he had left. They were both breathing hard, and when the sweet scent of her desire filled his nose he almost lost it again.

“Spend as long as you like here. It's yours to explore.” Then he bolted. He had to get himself away from her while he was able. The strength required to keep from turning around and taking her, now, against the tree, was astounding. He fled to his room and turned the shower to cold.

The icy water didn't help.

Analia, stunned, stayed leaning against the tree for a moment. It took a long while for normal thought to return. Licking her lips, she could still taste Sebastian. A shiver rolled through her as she committed his kiss to memory. His masterful, demanding, masculine kiss.

Her first real kiss.

It was more than she had ever dreamed it could be. He kissed her as though she were a drink of water to a man dying of thirst. Her head lolled against the tree, as she tried to calm a body that longed for satisfaction.

Over and over, her mind returned to his hands on her flesh. Warm. Strong. He had felt so good.

Then he'd left her as though she were a diseased animal, left her with all these unfamiliar desires raking through her. She ached. Never before had she ached like this.

Though within a few minutes her thoughts were her own once more, it wasn't until after a few hours of investigating the Sanctuary that the urges began to subside. Still, every now and again, she would remember the heat of his lips, his body hard against hers, and she had to start the calming process all over again.

How could he affect her so strongly? How could his arms around her feel as good as they had? She shivered once more, wishing he'd come back to finish what he'd started. She tried to distract herself with her surroundings.

The Sanctuary was incredible. The smells, so different, blended into a saturating mixture of crisp vibrancy.

It must have been a hundred times that she walked the path before she claimed a turf of soft green thicket, by the small stream of water. Settling in, she allowed the sound of the water to trickle in her ears. This place was beautiful. Since she'd entered, she felt a strong sense of familiarity, like she had been in a place like this before. A memory sparked, and she forced herself to dig deeper into her mind.

As a child, she would visit a small stream by her home and watch the little creatures that lived in and around it.

The memory was fuzzy at first, but soon cleared. There were trees around her. Large trees, the size of them was daunting, seeming to reach into the clouds. She remembered holding hands with two others, a little older than her, to see if together they could encircle one of the trunks. They never could.

She couldn't remember who the other children were. Were they friends? Family? She could almost hear their laughter as they chased each other around the gigantic tree trunks. Dodging and jumping over gnarled, moss-covered roots. Anya smiled. There was a time when she was happy...loved, if her memory could be trusted.

There was more. An explosion brought them all to a halt. A sour smell filled the air. Someone grabbed her hand and pulled, rushing them away. The memory became fuzzy as chaos filled the last of it.

Tears brimmed in her eyes as she covered her mouth in shock. What had happened? She was sure that was her home planet. Were they under attack? And who were those children. She felt connected to them somehow.

Anya sat alone, pondering the memory and finding no answers.

Later that night, the sound of metal grinding jerked Anya awake. An explosion rocked the ship. Pushing through her sleep drugged mind, she jumped up from the couch. Was she dreaming? It could have been part of a nightmare brought on by her recovered memory. In silence, Analia waited.

Another explosion.

Instantly her mind went to Darius. He must have found her. Her head pounded painfully, her breathing was clipped. She needed to think. What could she do?

The only way they could escape him was if the warp drive was working. She could fix it, but then they would need a large stockpile of energy to feed it, and the only place to find that, at the moment, was in her.

Could she reveal herself to Sebastian? To the entire crew? If she did, Darius would know instantly what she was doing. Like a signature, he would read her through the energy of the ship. She would have no more secrets, and even if they escaped Darius, she would be in danger of being exploited once again.

Pacing back and forth, she wondered what Sebastian would do with her when he found out about her gift. Would he become like Darius? Using her for his own gain?

Another explosion, this one was louder and stronger.

She was out the door before she realized. She would do anything to keep the people on *Marada* safe. They were in this situation because of her. How could she let anything happen to them when they had shown her nothing but kindness?

She raced down the halls, moving so fast that the control room doors didn't have time to fully open before she was squeezing through them.

The control room was laden with commotion. Sebastian was there, yelling out orders to the crew. The huge floor to ceiling window revealed a foreign ship with sharp cut corners and almost no curves. Her relief was tremendous. It wasn't Darius.

At Sebastian's command, *Marada* opened fire and berated the other ship with a stream of explosions. The opposing ship sent only one last blast at them before they were crippled by *Marada's* sheer firepower. The offending ship hung in space, quiet, like a piece of space garbage. Eventually, it came back to life only to attempt an escape.

"Let them go," Sebastian called. "They're harmless."

The room erupted in cheers. Until they all noticed her standing there. The cheering cut off. A growl erupted from Sebastian so fierce it caused Anya to jump.

What was wrong?

Sebastian practically dove at her. He had his jacket off and around her in seconds flat. "What are you doing?" he grated. "Why are you here dressed like that?"

Oh.

In her frenzy, she hadn't realized she was wearing one of the short silk sleeping garments. Her cheeks heated. "I...I was concerned. I heard the explosion and I thought..."

He herded her out of the room and guided her down the hallway. "You thought what?"

"That we were under attack," she edged. She wasn't going to reveal that she had a specific attacker in mind. "I was frightened."

"And you had to go running about the ship with almost nothing on?" Once they entered her room, his grip tightened on her shoulders. "Who is it Anya?"

She shook her head at his question. Her blond hair tumbled in waves.

"Who are you afraid of?"

She looked away, unable to meet his gaze.

"You thought whoever attacked us tonight was coming for you, right? Tell me who it is."

"I can't," she whispered. "Please don't ask me." When her body shook with emotion, he pulled her into him, wrapping her in his arms. She instantly felt protected, safe, and she buried her head in the crook of his neck while he held her.

"I won't let them get you. I promise."

"You can't promise me something like that, Sebastian. But I thank you anyway." He kept his hold on her, but didn't argue. How could he? She would leave the ship soon, and he would be nowhere near to protect her... from anything.

"Are you okay to be by yourself? Should I stay?"

"I'll be fine," she lied.

He held her for a moment longer before he left. Then she curled onto her couch and lay awake for the remainder of the night.

CHAPTER 12



Sebastian was fuming when he reentered the control room. The crew took care to avert their eyes, knowing he was a demon on the Edge. Seeing lust in many of their eyes when they had looked upon Anya had instantly driven him there. Nothing had ever pushed him to the Edge so quickly.

And who could blame them for looking? Sebastian himself wanted to steer her into a darkened room and make waste of the thin material that sheathed her body. By her reaction in the Sanctuary, she might have let him.

He shook the thought from his head.

Only when he had Anya in his arms was he able to calm, almost as quickly as he'd become enraged. A mere touch from her had pulled him away from the Edge. *Amazing.*

Anya seemed oblivious to all this.

Her refusal to tell him who his first target was once the wards came down was irritating. But he was sure he would find out eventually. Did she refuse to tell him because she was still frightened of going back? Did she really think him capable of that?

She'd scoffed at his promise to keep her safe, though she was right. How could he keep her safe when he planned to leave her in order to hunt

down her pursuer? He would charge Sonya and Calic with watching her in his stead. Maybe even Marik. But Anya was right. He wouldn't be there to keep his promise. And once Sebastian destroyed whoever was after her, it didn't guarantee her safety. Anyone with eyes would want her.

A growl reverberated through him. All who stood nearby, subtly inched away.

The only way to keep his promise was to keep her with him, and that wasn't an option. The effect she had on him was dangerous. He already craved her. Already would give her anything. He had no intention of allowing the attachment to grow any stronger than it already had.

It was a good thing she hadn't wanted him to stay with her this night. If he had a whole night with her, he feared he would be lost...addicted. And then he might never be able to let her go.

Marik watched Anya cruise through the salon like a zombie. Either she'd slept poorly or her mind was on other things. Probably both.

Like everyone else, he'd heard the explosions last night and knew if they were in any real danger they would have heard about it over the intercom. But Anya had definitely been frightened by the event. Sebastian had been here earlier and told him what happened. Marik could understand her fear. Long after he'd gained his freedom he'd been just as jumpy.

Though Anya had been enslaved same as him, she was coping a lot better than he had. Marik envied her strength. Two hundred years of torment could have broken him completely, but she was like a bright ball of energy, eager for her new life, and ready to forget her old one.

Perhaps Anya had an easier time of locking away the bad and forcing it out of her mind. It had taken him a long time to be able to block out his own memories. He still struggled with it at times.

“Anya,” Marik called after her, as she prepared to carry out an order of food.

“Yeah?” She stopped mid-door and craned her head to look back at him.

“Don't forget the soup.”

“Oh. Right.”

She had been like this all day. She wasn't herself. She was forgetful and less attentive than usual, her features drawn in constant worry.

The party tonight should cheer her up. Marik quirked his lips and went back to cooking.

Before Analia's shift was over, Marik had sent her away to get ready for the party. Sonya joined her in her room to fuss with her hair and help her pick an outfit. The dress she wore was a V-neck with straps that crossed in the back, which was also low and sloping. The color was an off white—which Sonya said set off her skin tone, whatever that meant—and the hem ended just above her knees.

Before, the pair of shoes she was wearing would have scared the hell out of her, but now she slipped them on like an expert.

Sonya was kind enough to show her some dance moves and even practiced with her a little. They laughed themselves to the floor as the moves became sillier and more exaggerated. Anya was nervous for the date-that-really-wasn't-a-date. She hadn't seen Xandar since the day he asked her out, so she'd been unable to set him straight about tonight.

A ringing in the room let her know he was here and her nerves became flat out panicked.

Sonya let out a small giggle. "It's okay. Remember you're in charge."

"I'm in charge," Anya repeated in a ghostly tone.

That made Sonya laugh even harder. "Next time, say it like you mean it."

Anya stuck out her tongue and moved to open the door. Xandar stood there in a pair of nice pants and a button down shirt. His hair was spiked. He looked...like he always did.

"Hey, Xandar!" Sonya called from inside the room. "We're almost ready."

Xandar rolled his gaze over Anya, stopping for a moment at her cleavage. Awkwardly, she shifted her stance. "Hi," she said lamely.

"You look...I mean...good. You look really good." He finally met her eyes and smiled.

"Thanks," she said, and then raised her voice so Sonya could hear her. "I thought this was a dress up event."

Again Sonya laughed and came up beside her, dressed in a tight red top that laced up the center and a flowing skirt to match. Her black hair was in waves down her back. "It is. Xandar is just a slob."

"Hey," he said, in a mock hurt voice. "This is as dressed up as you're ever going to get me." He winked at Anya. "Putting clothes on is not what I'm into."

Sonya threaded her arm through Analia's and walked her out of the room. "Down, boy."

As soon as they came close to the salon, Sonya practically bounced with glee next to Anya. *She must really like parties.*

Then they entered the salon where Anya had her fourth major shock in two days. A huge banner that read HAPPY BIRTHDAY ANYA hung on the wall.

It looked as though everyone on the ship was gathered here and they were all smiling at her. Clapping and loud cheers erupted through the

room. Anya had a sudden, irrational urge to turn and run away. She gave Sonya, whose smile was radiant, a questioning look.

"It's a party for you," she offered with warmth. "Consider it a belated birthday slash freedom slash just because party."

Her throat tightened, and she struggled to bite back a brewing sob, while her eyes pricked with what promised to be a river of tears. "This is...so wonderful Sonya...I can't believe you did this."

Xandar pulled her against him with one arm. "It was nothing. You deserve the best." His touch sobered her, actually helped to put a damper on her emotions.

Pulling away from Xandar, she hugged Sonya with all her strength. "Thank you."

Xandar interjected, "Hey, the three of us should take this to another room."

Sonya punched him in the arm and led Anya deeper into the crowd.

Spotting Marik, Anya leapt into his arms. "You knew about this, didn't you!"

"Of course I knew. I made the cake."

"Cake?"

Marik's eyes lit up. "That's right. You've never had cake." He pointed to a long table filled with a mixture of food and drinks. At one end was a thick rectangular blob. Anya leaned her head on Marik's shoulder. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me till you try it. Oh, and let me know when you're about to, so I can watch. I have a feeling it will be similar to the chocolate incident."

Anya giggled at him. "Oh, we're turning that into an incident? That was more like an ambush." Looking around the room, Anya noticed that there were two people missing from the crowd. "Where are Calic and Sebastian?"

Marik looked at Sonya for the answer.

“They'll be here,” was all she offered.

Music began to blare through the room and Anya found herself being pulled through the crowd again, waving at familiar faces as she went.

“Come on Anya, let's dance.” Sonya began moving her body to the beat of the music.

Anya followed suit. Though Sonya was obviously more experienced, Anya thought she was keeping up nicely. Suddenly, Xandar was dancing next to her. When more people joined in, she relaxed a bit, noticing many of them danced as poorly as she did.

After a few songs, people left the dance floor and started to gather around the food. She remained with Sonya and Xandar, and a small surrounding crowd.

Dancing was great! It was fun and freeing getting lost in the beat of the music. Xandar seemed to be playing a game where he would mirror her moves. When she tried to match his moves as well, he took that as his cue to wrap his arms around her waist.

As much fun as she was having, there was something amiss in his touch. Just when Anya was about to pull away, she spotted Cale and Bastian enter. After spotting her with Xandar, Cale kept a watchful eye on Sebastian as if at any moment he would have to tackle him to the ground. Sebastian had a look of...unmitigated calm. But at closer inspection, his fists were clenched and his jaw was tight.

In one of his hands, Cale wielded a sword. *Why would he bring a weapon?* Anya had a sudden inkling that Bastian might snatch it to take off Xandar's head.

For the sake of Xandar's safety, she broke away from him and continued dancing with a little less enthusiasm. Xandar didn't take the hint, staying close to her.

Sonya hadn't noticed their entrance, until Anya asked her why Cale had brought a sword. Sonya's eyes flashed to the door and she waved them over.

“Hi guys! Is that what you've decided on? Figures.”

Bastian answered, “What could possibly be a better gift than a sharp and deadly instrument.” The last was sneered in Xandar's direction.

Anya only heard the word gift. It was the sword she practiced with every morning. “What do you mean by gift?”

“This is for you,” Cale said, handing her the hilt. “To keep,” he added, noting her expression.

“I can't take this!”—shaking her head—“Guys, thank you for everything, but this is too much.”

“It's not up for debate,” Cale interrupted. “I expect you to bring it to every training session.”

She reluctantly took the sword, then threw her free arm around Cale. Rigidly, Cale tapped her shoulder. Then she moved to Sebastian, whose body stiffened as she embraced him. Their kiss still hung between them, heavy and obscure. She lingered a little longer than she should have, taking in his masculine scent, before she pulled away.

Gazing at the sword, Anya said, “I don't think I can carry this thing around all night.”

Xandar let out a hearty laugh. “That would certainly make things interesting, if you know what I mean.” He didn't notice the death looks from three demons.

Somehow she had become theirs to protect. Her lips curled at the thought.

Xandar continued, oblivious. “Are you thirsty, Anya? I'll get us some drinks.”

“Uh, sure. Thank you.”

Sonya took the sword from her and handed it back to Cale. “Find a place for that. Anya can take it with her on the way out.” Cale disappeared with the sword. “I told them to find you something nice. Never send a male,” she sighed.

A new song began to play, and with renewed excitement, Sonya pulled a random male from the sidelines to dance with her, leaving Anya and Sebastian to themselves.

They stood in silence for a moment before he spoke. “Are you having a good time?”

“Yes, thank you. It's amazing that you guys did this.”

“Have you eaten?”

“No, not yet. I've just danced so far.”

“I noticed,” he murmured. “You should try the cake. I hear it's layered in chocolate.”

She laughed at that. Bastian raised an eyebrow. “Yes, Marik wants me to warn him before I do, so he can watch me go mindless from the taste, as I'm sure I will.” That pulled a smile from him and she relaxed a little.

“Here you go.” Xandar moved in beside her and handed her a cup filled with a red liquid.

“What is it?”

“I'm not sure. You'll have to ask Sonya. I think it has some alcohol in it though.”

Anya took a sip. A fruity tang encompassed her taste buds. “Mmm.”

Xandar slipped an arm around her waist. A show of possessiveness? Sonya mentioned that males can become possessive when they strongly desire a female. Anya swallowed hard.

“Do you want to dance some more? Or we could grab some food and take a seat.”

Bastian's features had darkened, and he was scowling dangerously at Xandar. “I think we should eat now,” she quickly said.

“Good, I'm starving.” Xandar grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the table of food. Anya turned back for a last glance at Sebastian, but he was gone.

After gathering a plate of food, they sat at one of the empty tables. Xandar refreshed their drinks, and they both began to eat. As always, the food was excellent. Marik was amazing. She sipped her drink, and thought what it would be like to cook for herself when she was finally on her own. Inwardly, she cringed. She should ask Marik to teach her a few things at the first opportunity.

“You dance well for someone who says she’s never danced before. In fact, it's hard to believe.”

“Well it's true. I haven't.”

“Why is that?”

“Never had the opportunity.”

“How is that possible?”

I was locked away by a madman for my entire life.

“I was never asked to dance.”

“So I'm your first? That's nice to know. Then are you ready to dance some more?”

Anya smiled, feeling slightly affected by the alcohol. “Sure, why not.” Deciding this would be her last drink of the night, she finished what little was left and entered floor.

Sonya was still enjoying herself, occasionally pulling in an unsuspecting male to dance with her. Each of her partners would nervously glance around the room, Anya suspected, to locate her brothers.

Xandar pulled her against him and started swaying to the music. “I really like you, Anya.” He stared into her eyes the way Sebastian sometimes did, but she didn't react the same way. There was nothing in his eyes that made her heart skip, her stomach flip, or make her shiver with

anticipation all at the same time. She needed to tell him she wasn't interested.

I'm in control.

"Xandar, I..."

"May I cut in?" a gruff voice spoke from behind her.

Xandar gave a look of annoyance. "Sure, as long as it's okay with Anya."

"It's okay," she said, trying to keep the excitement out of her voice.

Xandar stepped back, and Sebastian's hands were suddenly around her waist. Her body reacted to him instantly, warming to his touch. Her heart began to pound.

The music became measured and steady. As he led her through the dance floor, their movements became synchronized.

It didn't escape her notice that he was taking her farther and farther away from her date. It didn't matter. All that mattered was that she was once again in Bastian's arms. Nothing felt better. It made her realize how uncomfortable she'd been with Xandar.

Together they swayed to the music, him looking down at her, her looking up. With his eyelids drooping, he said, "I love it when your eyes go silver."

Remembering his kiss, her gaze fell to his lips. "Are they?" When he pulled her closer, their dance slowed and everything around them disappeared. His muscular chest rubbed against her. "Bastian." Her voice was low and throaty. His liquid gold eyes grew heated and she thought he might kiss her right here on the dance floor.

He broke the spell when he said, "I don't like seeing you with Xandar."

Anya took a moment to catch her breath. "It's only a date."

"You can do better than him."

"Can I?" They were still swaying to the music, bodies pressed against each other. "Who would you consider better?" Sebastian didn't answer.

“What concern is it of yours anyway?” Still he remained silent. “Xandar is a nice enough guy, and he actually had the guts to tell me he likes me.” Though she didn't return the feeling. *Why am I defending him anyway?*

Maybe because Sebastian kept her at a distance when it was obvious he wanted her. Why would he kiss her, or dance with her if he didn't? He seemed to pull her to him and then push her away in the next instant. Even now, she could feel the turmoil inside him. Why? Did the thought of her being a slave repulse him?

Suddenly a wave of nausea rushed through her, and she had to grab her head to keep the room from spinning, which didn't work anyway.

“What's wrong?” Sebastian steadied her.

“I feel dizzy.” As she said the word, the world flipped upside down and she had to grab onto Sebastian for support. “I need to lie down.” *Right here on the floor would be perfect.*

From far away, she heard Xandar's voice. “Anya, are you okay?”

Sebastian answered for her. “She's not feeling well. I'm taking her back to her room.”

“I can take her,” Xandar protested.

“No, you stay and enjoy the rest of the party.” Sebastian's tone left no room for discussion. He led her from the room, allowing her the dignity of walking all the way out on her own, before he scooped her up in his arms and carried her the rest of the way. “How much did you drink tonight?”

“Two?” It was a question, not an answer.

“You don't know?”

“Two,” she repeated, more sure this time. “Stop bouncing.” She groaned, closing her eyes and immediately opening them when her dizziness grew worse.

Sebastian was saying something, but she didn't hear him. Every fiber in her was concentrating on not retching all over him. After what seemed like hours, she felt a soft cushion beneath her and a blanket came over her.

With her hands, she searched for the back of the couch to get her bearings. When she found nothing, she cringed. *Not the couch. The bed.* She let out a sound of protest, but didn't dare move.

Sebastian leaned over her. "Do you need anything?"

"Couch."

"Aren't you more comfortable in the bed?"

She was, dammit! And she was too tired to argue further. Drifting, she closed her eyes for what she thought was only a second. When she opened them again, Sebastian was setting a glass of water on the nightstand. He swept the back of his hand along her forehead, then her jaw. The touch eased her nausea slightly.

Then, without warning, or provocation, her body exploded with want. Needing to be touched everywhere. But she had become like a lead weight, sinking into the soft mattress, and she was unable to reach for Sebastian as he pulled away from her. Fuzzily, she heard him speak.

"Sleep well. I'll return in the morning to check on you." Then he turned to leave.

An intense wave of fear swept through her, almost stealing her breath. In a shaky voice, she called to him before he was out the door. "Bastian!"

With one hand on the door frame, he turned to her. "Yes?"

"Don't leave." Her voice was barely a whisper. With obvious concern, he came back into the room. "Please don't leave me alone."

Sebastian saw terror behind her eyes. "What are you frightened of?"

At first she didn't answer. "I don't know. I feel...wrong. I'm just...don't leave me alone. Please."

Fierce primal protectiveness overcame him. He wouldn't deny her request, and he didn't like that she felt unsafe in her own bed. The desire to

join her and wrap his arms around her until she felt at ease almost overwhelmed him. But he would keep his distance.

Claiming the couch, he said, “Very well, I'll sleep here for tonight, how's that?”

For a moment he thought she might protest his chosen location, but she relaxed against her pillow and only watched him for a moment before closing her eyes. He thought, just before her lids joined, that they had fired silver, but assured himself he was mistaken.

Soon her breathing slowed. She was asleep. If only he could fall asleep so easily. The couch smelled of her, drowning him in her scent, keeping him tense with need, and constantly reminding him of the way her warm soft body felt against his. The way she tasted on his lips, the feel of her perfect ass under his palm.

He ground his jaw. At this rate, he would be up all night with a raging hardon, but at least *she* would sleep through the night. It filled him with gratifying pleasure that she felt safe with him.

According to Anya, she'd only had two drinks tonight. It didn't make sense that two drinks would knock her on her ass so quickly. Especially since Sonya didn't put very much alcohol in the punch.

At some point during the night, when Sebastian was somewhere between sleep and awake, he heard the door slide open. Footsteps came near, and he shot straight up.

“Oh, shit.” Xandar jumped and fumbled with something in his hands, almost dropping it. After recovering, he asked in a breathless voice, “What

are you doing here? You scared the shit out of me.”

Sebastian narrowed his eyes. “What are you doing sneaking into Anya's room in the middle of the night?”

“I wasn't sneaking. I was worried about her. She didn't look too good when she left, so I was coming to check on her. Plus, she didn't get any cake, so I thought I'd bring her some before it was all gone.” He pointed to the covered container in his hand.

“She's asleep now and shouldn't be disturbed. Leave the cake if you want. I'll tell her you brought it.” Sebastian didn't like his excuse and really didn't like that he was able to get into her room so easily while she was unconscious. Suspicion clouded his mind. Xandar set the cake on the coffee table and turned to leave. “Xandar, how many drinks did she have?”

“I'm not sure. She must have had quite a few though, to get sick like that. Tell her I stopped by to check on her.” Then he was gone.

Sebastian glared after him. There was no way he was going to tell Anya that Xandar came into her room while she was sleeping. She was frightened enough as it was.

In the morning he would reset the lock on her door.

Anya awoke to a splitting headache.

“How are you feeling?”

The light in the room was brighter than she remembered. She squinted up at Sebastian. “Like I fell on my head some time during the night. What happened?”

“You might have had too much to drink.”

That didn't sound right. She tried to remember the party. There was the one drink before dinner and one during. "I'm sure I only had two drinks. The last thing I remember is dancing with you." She felt her cheeks grow warm. "What happened after that?"

"Not much. You got dizzy, so I brought you back here and put you to bed."

Bed? No, he didn't!

She looked around her, then regretted the quick movement. "You put me in the bed instead of the couch?" Her hackles began to rise and, despite the pain in her head, she was ready to yell at him.

"Yes. I took the couch."

That was like a splash of cold water to the face. "You slept...here? Why?"

"Because, you asked me to."

Why would I do such a thing?

He caught her expression and answered her unspoken questions. "You were afraid. That's all. And see, you slept the night through, in the bed, and you're still alive. Amazing, isn't it?"

Through grinding teeth, "That's probably why I was afraid in the first place." Sebastian just smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. She tilted her head at him. "What is it?"

"Nothing. You can stay here all day and recover. No training, no serving in the galley, or at the pub. Are you hungry?"

"A little." She sensed there was something else he wasn't telling her. His energy was tight.

"I'll bring your meals to you, so you don't have to leave." He pointed to the bedside table where a large glass of water and plate of pastries rested. She downed the water in a matter of minutes and relaxed back on the bed, leaving the pastries for later—when her stomach and head were finished with their acrobatics.

Sebastian departed, promising to return with lunch. It didn't take long for her to drift back to sleep, not even realizing that she hadn't bothered to move herself to the couch, like she'd planned.

The door to her room slid open and she was instantly awake. The noise was, for some reason, disturbing. She bolted up in bed and had to grab her head between both hands.

"It's just me." Sebastian carried a tray of food toward her and then pointedly eyed the forgotten pastries. "I brought lunch. Did I wake you?"

Lunchtime already?

Her stomach growled as she nodded at him. "But it's okay. Obviously my stomach is happy to be awake." The food smelled delicious, and she dug in without another word. She closed her eyes as she chewed, enjoying every flavor. It was already making her feel better. When she was done, she noticed Sebastian staring at her.

"I enjoy watching you eat," he said. "It's like you savor the last bite as much as the first." He seemed a little different today, softer. He was smiling and relaxed. His usual mask was nowhere to be found.

She smiled back at him and set the finished tray aside. "I can't help it. All the new flavors are too good to ignore. I want to commit them all to memory so I never forget them. So the next time I taste something similar it will always remind me."

"Remind you of what?"

"My time here, with all of you. No matter what happens to me, I'll always remember how happy I was, am, on this ship." She settled back down and cuddled into the pillow.

Sebastian's smile had faded slightly. "I hope wherever you end up, you'll be happier than you are here."

That made her smile. "That's a nice thought." However, hard to believe.

He walked to the door. "Do you need anything else?"

“No. Thank you.”

When he was gone, Anya felt his absence like a heavy weight. She liked it when he was near, and was starting to think of him constantly when he wasn't.

Her memory of the night before was returning in chunks. Soon after Sebastian had carried her from the party, she had begun to feel—besides dizzy—an almost maddening desire to be touched. But she couldn't get the words out, or even get control over her body. If she had, Sebastian would have had to fight her off of him.

She remembered asking him to stay with her. He'd given little, almost no protest at all. Only, she hadn't meant for him to sleep on the couch. She had almost outright invited him into her bed. Luckily she'd had the sense—or was it the degenerating vocal skills—not to push the issue. She must have passed out at that point.

She should be thanking the gods for that.

Should be.

CHAPTER 13



By evening, Anya started to feel better and was getting restless. She felt well enough to put in some hours at the pub. After a long shower that washed away the last of the effects of the alcohol, she dressed in a white blouse, the fabric light and airy, and a patterned skirt that fell just above the knees. Her blond curls were left to flow free.

Anya thought of Sebastian, knowing he'd bring dinner and find her room empty. She was certain he'd show up at the pub, if only to complain about her working instead of resting. But Anya didn't feel right about taking a whole day off, and she was embarrassed that she hadn't been able to last until the end of the party. Her own party, at that. She hadn't even had a taste of Marik's cake.

Exiting the room, she was immediately pushed back in by a pair of strong hands. At first she thought it was Sebastian, but the energy was wrong. "Xandar?"

"Anya, I'm sorry our date got interrupted. You truly are a lightweight." He continued to guide her farther into the room as he spoke.

"Uh...That's okay, Xandar. I...What are you doing?" The backs of her legs hit the edge of the bed. His energy was dark and muddy. It reminded her of...

Darius.

It felt like Darius was in the room with her.

“I thought you would want a proper ending to our date.”

She watched in despair as the door closed behind him. Then he was on her. Pushing her into the bed, he covered her with his body, while holding her arms on either side of her. His mouth latched onto hers.

Turning her head, Anya cried out. “Xandar! Stop!” He didn't. He released one hand only to fist the material of her blouse and pull. She heard a rip, and her mind went wild, followed closely by her body. Xandar had to restrain her arms once again as she continued to struggle like a crazed animal.

“You'll like it, I promise. Though you would have liked it better last night.” His lips pushed into hers again, and she bit him as hard as she could.

“Ow! Bitch!” A heavy hand came fast across her face, and for a moment she saw only splotches of color. His strike put him off balance and freed her arm. Without thought, she drove her palm into his nose, causing his head to bow backward, giving her time to pull out from under him.

Before he could regain himself and lunge for her, she smashed the heel of her foot into the part of him that would render him nothing but a puddle on the ground—good thing she was wearing a pair of spiked heels. The sound that poured from him was one of pure anguish.

Cale's words rang through her head. “Never hesitate. When your opponent is down, either kill him, or run.” She knew she couldn't kill him, so she ran out the door in a flash. She glanced behind her to make sure he wasn't giving chase and ran into a solid wall of muscle. The impact threw her backward and she landed hard on her ass.

Quickly pulling herself up, she fixed her position to defend herself again.

Sebastian was staring at her, brows drawn together. “Where's the fire?”

Xandar stumbled from the room. She changed her posture, preparing to fight him off again.

His nose and lip were gushing blood. “Fuck!” He growled, while holding himself between the legs and pinning her with a stare that promised suffering. She'd seen that look many times before.

Sebastian's head moved between the two of them. Then his eyes dropped to her cheek, which made her notice the sting there—she was probably bleeding—and then to her torn blouse. Only now did Xandar notice Sebastian and he winced as he tried to straighten himself.

She felt the change instantly.

One minute there was Sebastian, and then, poof, something else entirely stood in his place. Only a second had passed for her to notice the energy shift, a thick pulse of rage that seemed to push out at her.

So fast—faster than even Calic moved—Sebastian had Xandar around the neck and slammed him against the wall with so much force that the metal let off a vibrating ring. Xandar's feet were dangling, and his face was quickly blanching from the sudden lack of oxygen.

Sebastian's horns shifted to crimson, looking hot to the touch, and his fangs seemed to grow, doubling in size before her eyes. The sound that came out of him shot a stream of pure terror through her heart. She wouldn't call it a roar; it was far more than that, with terrible promises of gruesome and agonizing pain buried through the layers of it.

What she saw before her was no longer a man, but a primal beast out of its cage. She couldn't help but back away from the sight, trembling worse now than when Xandar had attacked her.

When Sebastian finished with Xandar, what would he do to her?

Her frightened movement caught his attention, and he ripped his infuriated gaze from Xandar's struggles to focus on her, yet still holding

him in place. His stare made her blood run cold. Xandar's flailing slowed, becoming weaker and weaker attempts at escape.

Something in her eyes must have snapped Sebastian out of his rage because his features softened and he loosened his grip on Xandar, allowing him to suck in a straggled breath. But just as quickly, the beast was back in full control, focusing on Xandar again, who was straining for breath once more.

Torn, heart racing, she could either watch Sebastian kill Xandar, or she could risk herself to intervene. The death of Xandar wouldn't bother her, he deserved no less, but she couldn't bear to be any part of it. She'd seen too many deaths already.

"Sebastian," she breathed. "Don't kill him. Okay?" He only tightened his grip and bared his fangs at Xandar. Terrified, she moved to touch him, but before she could he looked at her hand as though he would bite it off. Hesitantly, her hand clamped over his muscular arm. "Let him down."

At first she didn't think he could even comprehend her words. His face twisted into a mix of emotions, as though he wanted to do what she asked, but he also wanted to squeeze until he popped Xandar's head from his body.

"Please." Her hand was still perched on his arm, tremulously holding his gaze with hers. The sound of another breath being sucked in gave her mixed emotions, to say the least, but she persisted. Finally, she felt him switch. The beast was retreating somewhere deep within Sebastian.

With a firm grip on Xandar, he pointed to her room and in a harsh grating voice asked, "Is anyone else in there?"

"N...No."

"Get in there and don't leave until I return. Don't open the door for anyone." He didn't wait for her to obey before dragging Xandar by the neck, kicking and screaming, down the hall.

She entered her room with a new kind of fear soaking through her.

Fear of Sebastian.

Sebastian dug his claws into his palms, needing to regain control. Cale wasn't near to act as a release for the violent rage seething inside him. Beating the living shit out of Xandar, before dropping him in the cell, had helped a little, although it would have felt better to have killed him outright.

Why had Anya asked him not to?

The man had bloodied her. Tried to force himself on her. How far did he get? Sebastian's roar reverberated, bouncing off the metal of the cell walls.

Peering down at Xandar's broken body, Sebastian slammed shut the thick metal door. *This is where he will stay until his fate is decided. The bastard will wish he'd died this day.*

He rushed back, needing to get to Anya. To make sure she was okay. He'd seen the fear in her eyes. Fear of...him?

Her touch had been abashed. Who knows how he might have looked to her. She'd clearly been terrified of him. He had scented her trepidation. But still she'd braved it to bring him back from the Edge. He needed her now, could feel himself slipping. Soon his control would be gone once more. Fury's grip was tightening.

Anya.

This morning, he'd reworked the lock on her door so that, from the outside, it could only be opened with a code. Xandar must have been waiting for her to come out. Then realization smashed into him, almost

forcing him back to Xandar's cell, to truly make him suffer. Xandar must have slipped something in Anya's drink, planning to take advantage of her last night.

Slamming his fist into the wall, Sebastian could feel his fangs elongating once again. He was losing it. The only thing that could calm him now was Anya.

When he came to her door, he entered in a rush. At the sight of her, he felt instant relief. She was standing in the middle of the room with her arms wrapped protectively around her torso. She had changed her ruined shirt, replacing it with a black top with white frill, the sleeves blossomed out at her wrists and the collar showcased the sculpted delicacy of her neck.

If she meant to look less appealing, then she failed. Her features were drawn tight, watching him warily. When he moved toward her, she backed away.

"Don't be frightened." He eased toward her again, and again she moved back, almost against the wall. He didn't want her to feel cornered. With his hands up, he assured her, "Okay. I won't come any closer. I just need to know that you're okay. He didn't hurt you, did he?"

Reaching up to touch her cheek, she dabbed at the small track of blood that lingered there. "I've had worse," she said, as if that were meant to reassure him. It only made his hackles rise. Her gaze dropped to his tightening fists, and she gasped, "You're hurt!"

He hadn't realized his knuckles were cut from the beating he'd given Xandar, and possibly from using the ship as a punching bag. Forgetting her fear Anya reached for his hand, examining the cuts with concern.

Before she could protest, he pulled her into him, wrapping both arms around her. "I've had worse." He inhaled her scent and felt the last of his rage dissipate. *She is safe.*

"Did you kill him?" Her tone was hollow.

He pulled back to look at her. “No,” he said, unable to tell if she was relieved or distressed by that. Her bruised cheek was starting to swell. “Come,” he commanded, pulling her into the bathroom and lifting her onto the counter.

She made no objections, but he could still sense she was frightened. She wouldn't meet his eyes. He retrieved a washcloth, dampened it with cool water, and began dabbing at the blood on her cheek.

Anya watched Sebastian from the corner of her eye as he went to work cleaning away the blood. He was focused and intent on his task, but couldn't seem to stop touching her in little ways. Softly brushing her hair, her shoulder, her hip. Was he checking her for further injuries? It seemed more intimate than that. It was almost as if he didn't even realize he was doing it.

His tenderness with her was astonishing. While he was focused on wiping the blood from her cut, Anya allowed herself to study him closer. He seemed calm now, though his energy was still erratic.

When he had first returned, still resembling the monster, it had terrified her. He'd still been enraged, much more so, it seemed. And not for the first time, she'd thought he might hurt her.

But when his eyes had found hers, he'd visibly relaxed, instantly morphing back into the Bastian she recognized.

With a gentleness contradictory to the man standing before her, he cleaned her wound. By his soft pats and concerned looks, she knew now

that he would never hurt her. She felt silly for ever thinking otherwise. He'd shown her nothing but kindness from the beginning.

"You're not frightened of me anymore?" he asked without averting his gaze from the cut on her cheek.

He was almost completely back to normal now. His horns were returning to their original dark black, and his fangs had receded. Thinking back to his other form, she couldn't muster the terror it had inspired in the first place. "No," she said simply.

"So easily?"

"You make it hard to fear you, Sebastian, when you treat me the way you do."

"And how's that then?"

"Like you would never hurt me, no matter how angry you are, or how much you might want to."

His golden eyes locked on hers with such intensity it stole her breath. "I would never want to hurt you." Cupping her face, he rubbed his thumb along her unmarked cheek. "I could never hurt you. If anything ever happened to you, I fear I will be trapped on the Edge forever." Leaning in, he lightly kissed her bruise. "I think of you constantly." He kissed her forehead. "Always." Then with the lightest touch, he kissed her lips.

With words so sweet, Anya couldn't help but lean into him. This wasn't the demanding kiss from before. This was soft, smooth, tender. This time he allowed her to explore him at her leisure. His lips were soft and warm, molded to hers, and she caressed them.

Her second real kiss ever was turning out to be the most erotic experience of her life. Sebastian was watching her with his liquid gold eyes, filled with restrained lust as he let her place soft kisses on him.

When she darted out her tongue, he dropped his hands to her hips, his body wedging between her legs. The second time she darted her tongue to lick his sweet lips, he opened, his tongue meeting hers.

From deep within him, she heard the rumblings of a satisfied groan. The mere sound stroked her own lust, and she instinctively dug her nails into his shoulders. Liquid pooled between her legs. Bastian's grip tightened on her hips.

"Let me taste you," he grated.

She couldn't think past the kiss. "W...What?"

"I'll go mad if I don't. I can scent your desire."

Her cheeks flared with heat. "I..."

He silenced her with a rough kiss, fueling her passion. Then he was on his knees, kissing and licking her inner thighs. She sucked in a breath. "What are you..." She trailed off when he hitched up her skirt and his hot mouth came over her. The only thing separating them was her thin underwear.

Then, as if he knew what she wanted before she did, he moved aside the fabric and licked slowly along her tender folds.

"Ah, gods!" Throwing her head back, she melted.

He licked again, up and down her sex. "You taste so good." His voice was deep and rough. She shook with pleasure as he traced his tongue back and forth. Her heart beat faster, her breath stuck in her throat. Soon she was panting. He groaned heavily against her, the vibration reverberating through her core. Her hips began to rock into his caress. Crying out, she arched her back as pleasure raked through her.

Sebastian pulled away with a mischievous look. "Do you like this then?"

"Yes."

"Do you want more? Until I make you come?" When she only nodded, he slowly licked, sending a thrill through her, yet stopping once again. She let out a frustrated sound, his eyes turned teasing. "Tell me you want to come."

She did, badly, and she wanted Sebastian to be the one to give her such pleasure. "Please, Bastian! Please make me...come." *For once!* Her voice was anguished with the need he'd built inside her. Her body was throbbing and her nipples had gone painfully hard.

Bastian latched onto her once again, stroking her with his masterful tongue. He pulled her to the edge of the counter, forcing her legs wider, and relentlessly swept his tongue through her tender flesh. When he found the spot that made her moan, he stayed there. Over and over he raked that spot, licking and sucking her into his mouth. Mindless to the bliss, her breath was coming in fast. She cried out as the wave of intense pleasure hit her.

"You're so beautiful," he said, watching her writhe before him. His lids had gone heavy.

She glanced down at his heated gaze, her cheeks burning. "Please don't stop."

With a chuckle, he returned his velvet tongue to her sex. Once again, he brought her to the edge of climax. Back arching, she screamed from the force of it. Sebastian rode her through the ecstasy, drinking her down. Wave after wave of intense pleasure assaulted her. When it was over, her body slumped, lethargic. Sebastian was still petting her, kissing her thighs.

When he stood, he said in a rough, teasing tone, "You're my new favorite flavor."

Embarrassment struck her. She quickly straightened her clothes and hopped off the counter, not knowing what to say or do. She'd never experienced *that* before.

As if he read her mind, he asked, "Had anyone ever done that for you?"

"No." She darted past him into the room, not sure where she was going.

"Good." He followed her. "I don't like the thought of any other man touching you."

She stopped to look at him, but didn't say anything in response. Then she noticed the bulge in his pants. Nervously, she looked away.

"I did not hurt you, did I?"

"Of course not." In fact, that was the greatest thing she'd ever experienced.

"Then what is upsetting you?"

She pointedly looked back at his crotch, and then at him.

He seemed to understand, because he said, "I will not lie to you. Right now, more than anything, I want to be inside you."

"But I will not push you," he hurriedly added when he saw her abashed expression. Gently, he pinched her chin and forced her to look at him. "I won't do anything more until you ask me." Gods, her taste was still on his tongue, and his shaft was so hard it pained him. "And when you do, I will take my time with you. I want to taste every inch of your body, touch you everywhere. I want to hear your screams of pleasure while your legs are wrapped around me."

Eyes wide, her jaw dropped. He drew her in for a kiss, and once again she melted for his touch. He thought she would always melt for him like this.

When he pulled away, she said, "I thought you wouldn't unless I asked?"

"Kisses don't count," he smirked. "If I had to give up kissing you now, I'd go mad." A dark thought worried him. "Unless...do you not want me to kiss you?"

To his relief, she smiled. “I would have you kiss me whenever you like.”

With that, his mouth was on hers once more, in the most zealous kiss he'd ever experienced.

Against her mouth, he asked in a playful tone, “What else am I allowed without permission?” She giggled, and the sound filled him with pride. Her fear of him had dissolved, and she sweetly clung to him as if she didn't want to let him go. He didn't want her to. Then he heard the unmistakable sound of her stomach growling. “You're hungry.”

She clutched her stomach. “I guess I am.”

“I will bring you something to eat.”

“No, I want to get out of my room. I'll go myself.”

“I'll join you then, but I would like to take you to sickbay first.” At her look, he added, “Just to heal the rest of your cut. Then we'll eat.”

She gave him a sheepish look. “I know the way myself, if you're too busy...”

“I'm not busy at all.” In fact he hadn't been able to concentrate on anything but her since last night. Cale had to take command of the ship.

On the way to the sickbay, she kept looking at him as though deciphering a motive or a flaw in him. As for flaws, he would be sure not to show her any if he could. As for motives, it must be obvious. He wanted her, badly. As hard as he tried to keep her at a distance, to keep his emotions in check, he wanted her still.

Taking her with his tongue had been one of the worst decisions—and greatest, mind-altering, erotic experiences—of his life. He had a taste of her now, and he wanted more.

The doctor did a simple healing. Her cut was now only a pale scar. Soon that would be gone too. There would be no physical evidence of her attack, but Sebastian wondered how this would affect her mind. Had it

even fully sunk in? Then he worried how his own action might affect her so soon after the attack. He'd been unable to restrain himself.

He stayed close. Being too far away from her made him uneasy. When she excused herself to the bathroom and closed the door, Sebastian nearly grated the walls with his claws. The doctor was not oblivious to the change in his demeanor, but said nothing.

Then, like a kick to the left temple, realization hit him. He suddenly saw himself as though looking through another pair of eyes.

In his culture, it was fabled that every male was destined for a single female. One person among thousands—millions. Many mated couples swore by it, but Sebastian had always been skeptical.

Could it be true?

For a moment, dizziness surrounded him. He'd never given it much thought before. He'd been young and carefree when Cale had found his mate—and then that tragic end. The thought of Anya betraying him in such a way made him hollow with despair. How could he let himself get close to her? How could he give himself to Anya, knowing the sharpness of Calic's pain?

Then he spotted her, walking toward him, and her mesmerizing pale-blue eyes drew him in. The subtle sway of her hips accentuated her lush curves. Long blond hair framed her gorgeous features and lazily trailed down her shoulders. All but a single thought left him.

Mine.

He felt it through his soul.

Together they entered the salon, and Sebastian led her to an empty table. She felt warmed by his protective gaze. Even when he wasn't looking at her, he was watchful.

Marik stalked over. "Not you too?" he moaned. At their confused looks, he continued. "With Anya working here, everyone has grown used to being served at their tables. Now when you're gone, they all expect me to come out here and take their orders." He held up his hands when she opened her mouth to apologize. "Don't say anything. It's not your fault. I just can't wait for you to come back to work. How are you feeling?"

Nodding, she replied, "Better."

"Well, well, well." Calic's voice called from behind. Offering Anya a scolding glance, he said, "You missed training. An enemy won't care if you're feeling like shit."

She gave a bitter laugh. "Yes, I know."

Cale cocked his head.

Sebastian gestured for silence. "Anya, I must tell them what happened. Do you mind?"

She studied the table a moment, then nodded her approval. They would find out eventually. Why did she feel so guilty? As if it was *her* fault that Xandar had attacked her. Of course she knew it wasn't her doing, but she couldn't shake the feeling.

Sebastian began speaking to Cale and Marik in another language. Anya realized it was to keep others from hearing, she was grateful for that.

As Sebastian continued, she watched their faces grow dark and they periodically cursed. In turn, they all began mumbling very fast, their tones demanding, while glancing at her as if searching for evidence of harm.

When Sebastian pushed back his shoulders and spoke in a prideful tone, Cale turned to her with a grin. "That's my girl. You beat his ass, yeah?"

Wide eyed, she recalled her escape. With all that had happened, she hadn't thought of it till now. Amazingly, she had fought Xandar off, and had been on her way to safety—to Sebastian, to be exact—when she had run straight into him.

With a dumfounded grin, she replied, “I did. I didn't even have to think about it. My body just reacted.” She recalled how great it felt to make him bleed.

Cale let out a triumphant holler. “I think everyone will agree that I deserve an award for superb training.” Marik shoved him playfully as Cale continued, “I need to go rub this in Sonya's face.”

After Cale left, Marik turned serious and asked, “What are we going to do with Xandar?”

Sebastian looked at Anya before answering. “He's locked up for now. We'll figure the rest out later.”

Marik nodded, bloodlust evident in his eyes. They all wanted him dead. Because of her, another person would die. But didn't this one deserve it? Either way, she didn't like the idea. She noticed Bastian's eyes were on her, taking in her expressions.

Marik brought them an order of something he called comfort food. It looked like a simple noodle dish, but tasted sublime.

After only a few bites into the meal, Sebastian set down his fork and intertwined his hands. “Why do you want him alive?”

She slumped. She didn't want to explain, at least not here in the busy salon. “I just don't like the idea.”

“Why? You of all people should want that more than anything.”

True enough. She supposed she had every right to demand his head. A part of her wanted to, and she knew Sebastian would not hesitate. “First tell me something. What was that thing you turned into?”

He looked at her as though he didn't want to stray from his own questioning. “It's a demon trait. We call it the Edge. It happens when we

are driven to a boiling point of anger. A chemical, similar to adrenaline, but one hundred times more potent, is produced and distributed through our bodies, increasing our strength and senses. The drawback is that we tend to lose all reason, becoming more like a wild beast.”

“It happened so fast.”

“It's not always that fast working. But when one of our...” Sebastian paused. His lips quirked in a sexy grin. “When someone we care about is in danger, it can happen quicker than usual. There are a lot of factors involved. Just like when you get angry, many different things can push a demon to the Edge.”

Anya was silent for a moment. “Is that what you meant when you said you feared you would get stuck on the Edge? You’d get trapped like that?”

“Yes.”

“Can that really happen?”

“It has been known to happen when a demon’s...mate, is killed in front of him.”

She studied him for a long while. “Mate?”

“It's my turn to ask a question. I want to know why you asked me not to kill him.”

She sighed. “You already know more of my past than I would like.” When his gaze didn't waver, she conceded that he wouldn't let it go. “In the beginning, I was not compliant. I fought, hard. When it became clear that I would not submit through way of torture, D...the person who owned me began looking elsewhere for a way to control me. It didn't take him long. He began to torture others in front of me. He told me they suffered because of me, that I was the cause of their pain. When he started the killings, I gave in. I can't bear the thought of someone dying because of me.”

Sebastian grew cold. Once again, his face was unreadable. His energy, however—

“Tell me his name.”

“No.”

“Why!?” The room went quiet at his outburst.

Anya's eyes darted around the salon before she whispered. “Because I know what you would do.”

Through a clenched jaw, he replied, “You can't possibly think I would take you back there.”

“At first that is what I thought, but not now. Now I know you would seek him out to kill him.”

“And what is the problem with that?”

“Bastian, he's ruthless. He's a madman, a madman with a lot of firepower. I don't...I can't bear the thought of you getting hurt because of me, especially at *his* hand.”

Anya's lip quivered, her beautiful blue eyes glistening with unshed tears. This *madman* was a dead man. He had hurt her in so many ways, and Sebastian suspected he was only scratching the surface. “So this is why you pander for Xandar's life? He committed a crime against you. He is not some innocent who needs to be saved.”

“Believe me when I say I'm more than conflicted about it.”

Sebastian would accept that for now. Xandar had a stay of execution. Besides, there were other ways to punish one such as he.

Sonya rushed through the doors toward them. “Anya!” She scooped her up for a painful looking embrace. “I'm so sorry.” To Sebastian she growled. “Where is he? I'll kill him!”

So much for being discreet.

“He's locked up for now. We will decide what to do with him once we finish the contract.”

She glared at him. “How are you not more angered by this?”

“Oh, you should have seen him before.” Anya took another bite of food.

“Is that so?” Sonya smiled at him devilishly, “I'll bet Bastian never lets another male anywhere near you again.”

As right as Sonya was, Sebastian still gave her a look of irritation. She playfully swatted him on the shoulder before taking a seat.

“You didn't close the pub just to come see me, did you?” Anya asked.

“Hell no! I made Cale stay and watch the counter. He sure is proud of you though, isn't he?”

Anya beamed.

“Though I don't think his ego will ever be the same.”

In a barely audible voice, Sebastian said to Sonya, “I want you to go search Xandar's room. I do not believe two drinks alone made Anya so sick.” He switched to Demonish before continuing. “Xandar came into her room last night while she was unconscious. If I hadn't been there...” He trailed off and looked at Anya for the calmness only she could provide. He had to keep reminding himself that she was unharmed.

In Demonish, Sonya replied, “I'm assuming because you're telling me this in our language that Anya doesn't know about this.”

“Correct. And I don't want her to.”

“You think he tainted her drink?”

“Yes.”

“I'll tear the bastard's room apart if I have to.” She paused thoughtfully. “Why were *you* there?”

In defense, he said, “I stayed on the couch. Anya asked me to. She said she was frightened.”

“Hmm, perhaps she has a gift for sensing danger.”

“That might be so. I went to the Edge right in front of her. It was the fastest transition I've ever experienced. Must have only taken a second, but it seemed like she sensed it happening before I did.”

“Interesting. Well, I'm sure you will figure her out one day brother. I'm off to destroy, I mean, search Xandar's belongings.” Sonya hugged Anya once more before she left.

“What is that language you speak?” Anya asked, finishing the last of her dinner.

“It's called Demonish. It is the language of my people.”

“It's beautiful, even if you are using it to hide something from me.”

Marik approached then, saving Sebastian from forming a response. He set a plate in front of Anya. On top was a heaping slice of her cake. “I saved the last piece for you,” he said. “I don't think you had a chance to try some.”

With a look of pure affection, she gazed up at him. “Thank you.”

For a moment she studied the strange, new thing in front of her. Sebastian knew it must look odd to someone who'd never tasted it before. The color was so deep it was almost black, with a layer of chocolate frosting sliced through the middle and another on top.

She stabbed through one corner and placed a bite in her mouth. Her features were rapturous as she met the flavor. “Bastian, you must try this.” Placing another bite on her fork, she held it out to him. Then, realizing what she was doing, her cheeks heated and she began to pull the fork away.

Sebastian stayed her hand, lightly gripping her wrist. Her eyes jerked to his. He held her gaze as he brought the fork to his lips and took the bite, all the while making slow circles on her wrist with his thumb. In a sensual voice, “It's not the best thing I've tasted.”

Her eyes fired silver, causing his shaft to jerk in response.

“Uh.” Marik's voice broke the moment. Anya looked away from him, cheeks warming to a lovely shade of pink. “Sebastian can I have a word?”

Marik motioned to the galley.

Assuring her that he would be right back, Sebastian followed Marik.

As soon as the door closed, Marik whirled on him. "What are you doing?"

"I *was* enjoying cake."

You know what I mean. I thought you were trying to stay away from her. That looked like just the opposite to me."

"Maybe I've changed my mind."

"Are you prepared to keep her? Do you know what would happen if she fell for you and then had to leave? You don't know what kind of damage you would cause her. How badly you might hurt her."

Sebastian's stomach clenched. Already he felt like it was too late to let her go. His want was too deep. Could she truly be...?

He decided to tell Marik the truth. "I don't think I *can* let her go." He leaned against the wall as Marik's lips parted. That was probably the last thing Marik ever expected him to say. The only thing that could shock him more was if that statement had come from Cale. "Do you remember our discussions about the validity of matehood?"

The two of them would debate for hours on that subject. Marik had always believed it was possible, and now Sebastian did too.

"Well, I no longer believe it's a myth." Sebastian glanced at Anya through the serving window.

"You don't mean...tell me this is a joke."

"No joke, Marik."

Marik didn't seem to know how to respond. "What are you going to do? I'm assuming she'll be staying on the ship then."

Sebastian let out a hard breath. "I have to destroy whoever might be hunting for her first."

"Of course you do, if she truly is your mate."

“I will have to hide her somewhere safe while I'm gone. Then I will return for her.” Marik nodded in full agreement with his plan. “I would ask you to stay with her and protect her while I do this.”

Marik squared his shoulders. “Of course. Where would this hiding place be?”

“I don't know yet. Once we finish the mission, I'll want to head out right away. Right after I get her to tell me who it is.”

Marik nodded. “I never thought I'd see the day. Does she know?”

“No. But I think she feels it too.” Sebastian spied her through the window. She was laughing with three males that were now surrounding the table, engaged in conversation. Sebastian growled low in his throat as pure possessiveness surged through him.

Marik chuckled. “It must be true. I've never seen you like this with a female in my life. Thought it wasn't possible.”

“Just keep this to yourself for now, okay?” Sebastian was out of the galley and making his way to Anya before Marik could answer.

The males were of strong build. Sizing them up Sebastian was confident he could take all three in a fight. *They're merely talking*, he reminded himself. Pushing past the men, he claimed his place at the table, then greeted them as their captain. “Is there something I can do for you gentlemen?”

“No, sir. Some of us are gathering at the pool tomorrow and we were just inviting Anya to join us.”

“And?” He looked at Anya.

“I said I would consider it.”

Relief swept over him that she hadn't said yes. The idea of her in a bathing suit, her body on display for any male to see, made him crazed. Though, if it were just him and her...

When the three politely left, Sebastian studied Anya. Her cake was gone. It looked as though she had licked the plate clean. Then he noticed

she looked a little sad. “What is it? Would you like to go tomorrow?”

She shrugged. “I might, but...I don't know how to swim.”

Of course she didn't. When would she have had the opportunity to learn? “I could teach you, if you're not too tired.”

Her face lit up. “I'm not too tired.”

Sebastian mentally scolded himself. He would teach her to swim tonight, just the two of them, giving him all the pleasure of seeing her body clad in only thin fabric, wet and clinging. But then she would go tomorrow where anyone could look upon her. The former he wanted. He abhorred the latter.

Sebastian waited in the warm pool like an adolescent on a first date, while Anya changed into her suit in the other room. He was already hard as a rock at the thought, but when he saw her he nearly came in his swim shorts.

She wore a white two-piece bikini. A bow tied around her neck and one around her back. The material cupped her breasts, creating a V that joined at the apex over her heart. The bottoms rode low on her waist and displayed her flat stomach and deliciously perfect ass. His mate was gorgeous.

Anya approached the edge of the pool and gazed down at the water. “Do I just get in?”

“Yes.” He moved forward to help her.

“Is it deep?”

“Not this part. It gets deeper over there.” He pointed. “We’ll stay over here for now. You can hold on to me until you feel comfortable.” Sebastian inwardly grinned.

Anya crouched down and eased herself into the water. “It’s warm,” she said, clinging to the side. “Okay, now what?”

“Now let go of the edge and come to me.” He backed up a little to challenge her. Though Anya could touch the bottom, where the water came to his upper chest, she was up to her neck.

She made her way toward him slowly, feeling for the floor of the pool. “I don’t understand the point of this.”

“You’re not swimming yet.”

When she reached him, she instantly clung to his shoulders. Unable to help himself, he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her against him. She inhaled a shaky breath and brought her arms around his neck. Her body felt slick against his.

In a breathy voice, she said, “So, show me some swimming then.”

“I’ll need to put you down.” He loved that her hold tightened, and she looked as though she didn’t like the idea. To his disappointment, she nodded.

He let her slide down his body, relishing every soft curve and crevice. Reluctantly, he let her go.

“It’s simple, when you get the hang of it. You just kick your arms and legs to stay afloat and maneuver through the water.” With that, he swam to the deep end of the pool and back. “If you would like to try, I’ll take you in a little deeper.”

She bit her bottom lip, glancing at the other end of the pool. “You’ll stay with me though, right?”

“I’ll be less than a foot away. I won’t let you go under.”

“Okay then.”

With a little too much eagerness, Sebastian pulled her back against his chest. *Where she belongs.* He thought he might have scared her with his movements, but she only yelped in surprise and then let out the cutest giggle he'd ever heard.

She was so relaxed with him. He couldn't understand how she could be, after what she'd been through with Xandar, and then witnessing his change, but he adored her for it.

He moved a little further into the deep end until water was at his neck, where Anya could not touch the bottom. She realized this and her hold on him had become like a vice. "I'm going to let go. When I do, kick your legs back and forth in smooth fluid motions, not too fast. Do the same with your arms. You're just going to stay in one spot for now, and try to float."

"Okay." Her voice shook.

"I'm right here so nothing will go wrong."

She nodded.

"Ready?"

Another nod.

Linked, hands to forearms, Sebastian slowly held her away from his body. She began kicking her legs. When he let go completely, her movements grew panicked and she began to sink. He grabbed for her. She clung to him fiercely, with both arms and legs. He would have reveled in her position if fear didn't reside behind her eyes.

"You're okay. Here..." He walked to the edge of the pool and lifted her out of the water to sit on the side. Liquid beads cascaded down every part of her and he was awash in the sight of her once again. Stifling a needy groan, he backed away. "Watch me." He swam to the deepest part of the pool and hovered. "Can you see the way I'm moving my arms and legs?"

Anya stood to get a better look, also giving Sebastian perfect view of her body. His movements faltered, and he sunk slightly. Righting himself, he continued to tread the water for her observation.

After a moment, she said, "Can I try again?"

"Whenever you're ready." He started to move toward her as she slipped back into the water, but decided to keep his distance. "Let's try something else first."

Clutching the edge, she awaited his instruction.

"I want you to push off the edge and propel yourself toward me." At her aghast look, he added, "The momentum should be enough to get you this far without even having to use your legs. It will make you more comfortable." He was only a few feet from where she was.

She pondered his request for a moment and then pushed herself toward him. Sebastian latched onto her quickly.

"Good." He brought her back to the edge and moved a little farther out. "Try it again. This time kick off with your feet."

They practiced until she was able to reach him in the middle of the pool without a panic.

She was smiling, thoroughly enjoying herself. "This is fun. I understand now why you do this."

"Are you ready for something a little more fun?" She eyed him warily. Moving Anya to his back, he said, "Hold on to my neck, tight." When she did, he continued, "I'm going to dive under and you're coming with me."

"Um..."

"Just hold your breath, and hold on tight." At that, she crushed his windpipe. "Not that tight," he added, and she eased up on her grip. "Tap me if you're running out of breath, and I'll come right to the surface. Kick your legs with me to get used to the sensation." After a silent pause he asked, "Do you trust me?"

"Yes," she said, without hesitation.

"Take a breath and hold it." When she did, he dove.

He could feel her legs kicking with his. Under the water, he propelled them to the farthest end of the pool, not swimming too fast, allowing her

to get used to being under. She hadn't tapped him by the time they reached the end and rose to the top. Then he maneuvered her to his front, against the wall of the pool.

There was no fear in her, only excitement. "That was amazing. It was like flying."

"You're amazing." Sebastian brought his lips within an inch of hers. Water droplets clung there, and all he wanted to do was lick them off.

Anya's breath became erratic.

"Do you still trust me?"

She nodded.

He moved his lips, barely touching hers, but the touch was electrifying. "How about now?" His voice had gone low and husky. Still she nodded, causing her lips to rub against his.

Sebastian leaned his body into hers, loving the feel of her in his arms, so soft and warm and *his*. A surge of possessiveness rushed through him. He trailed his lips along her jaw, down to the soft curve of her neck. He could feel his fangs elongating, the urge to bite, to mark her as his was almost overwhelming. Opening his mouth, he rested his teeth there. She gasped with...excitement? Fear?

He pulled away, appalled at what he was about to do, what he still wanted to do. Then her eyes widened as she caught sight of his fangs.

CHAPTER 14



A nya should have been horrified. Should have screamed and fought to get away from Sebastian. He looked animalistic, intense. His fangs had grown just as they had when he'd been about to take off Xandar's head. She should have been cowering at the sight, but she wasn't. As it was, she was wildly aroused. More aroused than she knew was possible.

It was obvious Bastian had been about to bite her. Maybe he would have even drawn blood. She shivered. Why did the idea appeal to her? It was almost as if she craved it.

As though she weighed nothing, Sebastian lifted her out of the pool and seated her on the ledge. "It is getting late. Get dressed and I will walk you back to your room." He was backing away from her again. Closing himself off. A wall had been put up between them.

From the pool, Bastian watched her with intensity as she stood and walked across the hard floor to the dressing room. Like a predator ready to pounce. Only this predator was trying *not* to pounce.

Did she want him to?

Inside the dressing room, she steadied herself by placing a hand on the wall.

She *did* want him to.

She wanted him to pounce her up and down this wall. “My gods, what is the matter with me?” she whispered. Bastian made her crave things she had never wanted before.

The dressing room was small, with a few private enclosures, a plush chair, and a countertop with a mirror above. After she dressed, she checked her reflection, pleased to see she was gaining some of her weight back, though she still looked half starved. Her golden hair was damp and fell in waves down her back and shoulders. Then she studied her womanly parts, wondering how Bastian saw her. Her mind wandered back to his intimate kisses. She shivered, yet her body grew hot with need once more. Would he always affect her like this?

“Anya?”

She jumped at his voice coming from outside. Before, Bastian had mentioned that he could scent her desire. “Coming!” she called. She was still flush with desire and wondered if he knew it. When she left the dressing room, her fears were confirmed. His body was rigid, eyes on her in a steady unwavering gaze, gleaming with dark thoughts.

He too had changed out of his swimming shorts, donning a slightly damp black shirt that displayed arms sculpted like a work of art. Arms that had been tenderly wrapped around her only moments ago, were now rigid and crossed over his chest. He wore that thick silver chain around his neck which he'd been wearing in the pool. In fact, she hadn't seen him without it.

She stopped just feet away and looked up at his beautifully chiseled face. She expected him to embrace her—by his energy, she could tell he wanted to—but he turned without a word and led her out of the room.

The walk was once again silent. She could only wonder what was going on with him. He was hot one minute and cold the next. Was this a normal male trait, or exclusive to demons? She would be sure to ask Sonya about it.

Anya entered her room expecting Bastian to follow her inside, but he didn't. He stood silently in the hallway. A mix of emotions stormed across his features before he checked himself.

“Good night Anya,” he said in a controlled voice.

“You're not staying?” Did she really just ask him that? The words had poured out of her like liquid from a fallen glass. There was no recanting them.

“It's best if I don't.”

She gave a curt nod and the door slid closed. Turning to her room, she suddenly felt as though it were too dark, too quiet, and too empty. Before long she had every light turned on, illuminating every tenebrous corner, and searching in a frenzy for any light she might have missed.

Once she was satisfied she'd found them all, she washed up and sat on the couch. Thoughts of her encounter with Xandar swept over her.

This was her first moment alone since the attack. Sporadically, a whisper of unease would surge, followed by a flood of panic, and she would occupy her mind by searching for more lights.

Only when she began to yawn repeatedly, eyes growing heavy, body slumping in fatigue, did she allow herself to settle in for the night.

Decidedly, she created her nest of blankets and pillows in the corner. She would never be comfortable in the bed, and even the couch seemed unappealing tonight. Instead, she curled up under the mass of blankets with her back against two walls—the room still flooded with light—and closed her eyes.

Sebastian welcomed the blissful mindlessness as he released into his own hand, wishing it was Anya's soft body that eased him instead. The warm spray of the shower washed over his neck and back.

He had been so close to claiming her as his mate, so close to marking her as his forever, trapping them both in an unbreakable bond.

How would she have felt about it?

He knew how she would feel, going from the slave of one man to the possession of another, for that's what she would be. She would belong only to him. And him to her.

Would she hate him for it?

Of course she would. Just when she had gained freedom for herself, Sebastian was all too ready to take it away. She would yell and scream and flee from him as if he were her new jailer.

And he would be forced to keep her any way that he could.

When a demon took a mate, it was a lifelong bond. No woman, no matter how beautiful, could tempt that demon to stray. He would want only his mate for the rest of his life. Seek only her touch.

With Anya's soft body against his, her warmth, her scent, he had been so close to driving his fangs into her and drawing greedily.

Would she have accepted him? Melted in his arms as a true mate would?

Why was he even considering this? It was a moot point. Thankfully he had regained his senses before he did anything irreversible.

He dressed in a pair of loose-fitting pants and relaxed into his large empty bed. The look she had given him when he'd left her nagged at him. It was almost as if she was hurt by his leaving, when, in reality, she would be grateful if she knew the danger she was in. Still, her eyes had been stark.

No doubt at this moment she would be curled up on the couch. The attack probably caused all her fears to return. Was she afraid now without

him there?

Before his mind realized what his body was doing, he was already halfway to her room.

Just as he suspected, she had rejected the bed, but in lieu of the couch, she was once more on the floor. Sebastian frowned. The room was more brightly lit than if it harbored its own sun.

At his entrance, she'd shot straight up, but instantly relaxed when she saw it was him. Then merely shrugged at his questioning look. She carried no hint of drowsiness, was in no way close to falling asleep, and probably wouldn't as long as she stayed like that, in her defensive position on the floor.

Cursing, Sebastian fought the urge to scoop her up and take her to the bed himself. "If I stay here tonight, on the couch," he amended, "will you try to sleep in the bed?"

Biting her bottom lip, which made Sebastian instantly hard as steel, she nodded. But instead of making her way to the bed, she remained where she was, studying him. He was shirtless with only a pair loose fitting pants. Her gaze traveled his bare chest and arms, then moved even lower. His loose pants did nothing to hide his bulge, and he did not bar her from looking. She could look all she wanted. If she asked him to strip right now, he gladly would. When her gaze dipped to his bulge, she licked her lips.

Stifling a groan, he said. "Anya, you're killing me."

Her eyes snapped to his face. "How am I doing that?"

"Just get into bed before I put you there myself." His tone had sounded huskier than he meant it to. To his surprise, she looked as though she was considering the latter and amusement lit her features. His cock became impossibly hard.

As if mentally shaking herself, she stood and carted her hefty load of blankets and pillows to the bed. She was wearing a silky, long, light blue sleeping gown. The image lingered long after she was under the covers. He

realized Anya seemed to favor the silks when sleeping, opposed to the thicker, warmer materials. He imagined her in some of the more racy stuff he could buy for her. Now *he* needed to mentally shake himself.

He moved through the apartment, switching off more lights than he knew existed. When the room was finally dark, he became acutely aware of her scent again. Settling into the couch, he prepared for another long night of unsatisfied need.

“Sebastian?” she called through the dark.

“Yeah?”

“Why did you come to space?”

He thought it was an odd time for this conversation and suspected she was still a bit uneasy. “There was a devastating war. We were barely able to escape, Sonya, Cale, and I, before our planet was destroyed completely.”

Anya was quiet for a long moment. Sebastian thought maybe she had fallen asleep. “I think my planet was attacked. I think I was sent away during the battle.” She snorted with bitterness. “They meant for me to be safe.”

Sebastian ground his teeth. Whoever had planned her safe escape would die along with whoever else had hurt her.

There was another moment of silence. “What if my home planet has been destroyed too? I think I may have had a family. Sisters, maybe.”

“We'll find out everything we can about your...people. As well as where you come from.”

“There you go making promises again. I think I'll let you though. I like the way they sound.”

She still thought Sebastian planned to leave her. She had no idea he was contemplating keeping her forever.

“Did you fight in your war?”

Sebastian stiffened. He hadn't spoken about this to anyone but Sonya, Cale, and Marik. Even then, they hadn't brought it up in years. “I never got

a chance to.” Her silence urged him on. “I, that is, we were betrayed at the start of the battle, by some of our own. Cale and I, even Sonya had been eager to jump into battle and defend our planet. However, Cale's mate and our mother drugged us, betrayed us to the invaders. They were promised safety for their loyalty. We didn't know it at the time, but many of our kind had been lured to do the same. The war had really begun years before any blood had been shed.” Anya had remained quiet through his speech. “Anya? Are you asleep?”

“No.” Her voice was a little shaky.

“What's wrong?”

“Your own family betrayed you?”

“Yes.”

More silence. “What if...what if my family...”

“No,” he cut her off. “Never think that.” He hated that she jumped to that conclusion and hated how her voice shook with emotion. Although she could be right, someone in her family could have betrayed her.

“Did you...did you kill them, the ones who betrayed you?”

“No. At the time all I was thinking was how to escape, but I won't lie, sometimes I wish I had. I've...we have all had a hard time trusting people since then. Especially Cale.”

“Is that why you're at such odds with me?”

Sebastian couldn't help but chuckle. “So you've noticed.” His natural night vision was adjusting and he could see her clearly now.

She had the slightest smile. “Kind of hard not to.”

Sebastian didn't answer her question. Instead, he asked one of his own. “Do you have a gift Anya?”

Like a bullet, she sat straight up, jaw dropped, eyes widened in shock. “What?”

Touchy subject?

Sebastian pushed himself to his elbows to get a better look at her. “You seem to read people very well. Is that some kind of gift?”

She let out a harsh breath before easing herself back onto the pillow. “I...um...yeah, I guess.”

Her reaction was intriguing. He was now sure that there was more to it than he'd guessed. “What kinds of things can you read from people?”

Obviously she was weighing her answer, perhaps being a little too careful about her response. “I can sometimes tell when someone's mood changes. Like from happy to sad, or angry.”

“You sensed when I changed then?”

“Yes.”

“What was that like?”

“Daunting. It was like you had changed into something else entirely. You were happy one moment and pure rage the next. I've never felt anything like it.”

“I'm sorry you were frightened. It's hard to control.”

“It's okay. You made it up to me later.” She was smiling again.

The image she invoked had him wanting her once more. Her taste was exquisite, addictive. There would definitely be no sleep for him tonight. His shaft was relentless. At this rate, when she fell asleep, he would be sneaking into the bathroom to relieve himself for the second time tonight.

In the dark, faces began to appear.

Blurred faces.

Unreadable expressions.

The sound of chains scraped against cold hard floors. The faces laughed, moving to surround Analia. She was suddenly being held down by massive heavy chains, tightening around her wrists, legs, and throat. She tried to scream, but the chain was too tight, cutting off her air.

As the faces hovered over her they merged into one and began to clear, though she knew what she would see beforehand. Xandar's evil grin loomed over her. His hands grabbing at her, making her skin crawl. Then he morphed, his face molding into something else. She tried to look away, but even as she closed her eyes she could see.

Darius!

Anya woke to her own screams, body thrashing. Someone was shaking her. At first she thought to fight, but then Bastian's scent flooded through her and she instantly relaxed, able to come to her senses.

With a harsh sob, she threw her arms around him, seeking the comfort only he was able to provide. His strong protective arms didn't hesitate. He wrapped them around her and held on tight.

"Just a dream," he cooed. "It's okay."

She sobbed harder because it wasn't just a dream. "Bastian, please."

"What, beautiful?"

"Please make me forget."

He squeezed her tighter, seemingly at a loss. "You have no idea how badly I wish I could."

She knew he couldn't. The memories were there until she could overcome them. But Sebastian could ease her in other ways. In ways she was only now beginning to realize how badly she needed. His touch alone dimmed her memories. His kiss made her feel desired, beautiful, and more cherished than she could even describe.

She felt wonderful being in his arms. "Please, Bastian. Please touch me, kiss me." She almost said love me.

"Anya I..." Shaking his head, he held on to her.

She could tell by his energy that he was going to deny her. Thinking quickly she reached past the elastic of his pants and grabbed hold of his thick shaft. He was immense and hard in her hand.

"Anya!" He shuddered and threw his head back, thrusting into her hand. She was growing wet at the idea of him thrusting into her like that. Unable to stop herself she licked along his chest, savoring his manly flavor.

With a carnal sound, he pulled her lips to his and scorched her with his kiss. This was not like any kiss before. This was a branding, primal, and aggressive kiss. He held her in place by the back of her neck as his mouth slipped over hers. A hungry sound escaped him as he demanded entry. She willingly gave in, opening for him. Hot and wet, his tongue found hers.

As he tasted her, she hazily realized she was still gliding her hand up and down his shaft. When she rubbed her thumb over the tip, Bastian seemed to lose himself completely, and a low groan left him. To Anya, the sound was a triumph, as well as an aphrodisiac. Her body throbbed, her skin growing hot and sensitive.

Though she really had no idea what she was doing, instinct seemed to be guiding her. When she brushed her hard nipples against his chest, she was rewarded with a calloused hand gripping her backside. She thrilled at the touch, longing for more. She let out a soft needy moan, and he went wild.

Tossing her to her back, he covered her with his massive body, pushing himself between her legs. In the back of her mind, she registered the silk being torn from her body. She hardly cared because he continued to kiss her masterfully, hard yet tender, while his hands roamed her body.

She made an aggravated sound when he removed his mouth from hers and was about to argue, but she caught the gleam in his eye, a wicked look burning with promises of things to come. It stole her breath. He took one hard nipple in his mouth and she gasped. Arching into his touch, she cried out from the pleasure.

While he continued flicking and teasing her nipple with his tongue, his hand trailed down her stomach and through the soft curls until he met with her core. She gasped once more, mindless with an overload of sensation.

“Is this where you need me?” His voice sounded so rough, on the verge of losing control.

“Yes!”

She began undulating her hips to his rocking finger. His lips returned to her breast as his fingers made slow, maddening movements along her sex. The pressure began to build. She cried out as it overwhelmed her, making her breaths short and fast and her heart pound against the wall of her chest. Then he delved one finger inside her. She squeaked out a moan and opened wider for him.

“Gods, yes, Bastian!”

A second finger entered her, increasing her pleasure. When he suddenly pulled away from her, she had no words for her devastation. Just as she was about to protest she felt his tongue trailing down her body, his hands gripping her hips. She shuddered in anticipation.

His hot tongue met her liquid core and she couldn't stop the scream of pleasure that was forced from somewhere deep inside her. She writhed, thrashing her head on the pillow. Another scream tore out of her as she climaxed. The waves of pleasure seemed never ending, and all the while, he continued his relentless licking and sucking.

She finally went limp and he rose above her, easing himself between her legs once more. Eyes wide, her heart began to hammer.

What have I started?

Sebastian couldn't believe his current situation. He marveled at his Anya's beauty, taking in every inch of her spread before him. Her breasts were plump, hard and wet from his attention, rising and falling with her heavy breathing.

His shaft was straining for her body. He needed to be inside her, badly. Vaguely, he noted her sudden apprehension as he climbed over her. As bad as he needed her tight core clutching his shaft, he needed to know she was absolutely ready for him.

"I'm going to ease myself into you. Do you want me to?" Her eyes debated. Then she nodded, but her reluctance showed. Her body had gone stiff. "Tell me to stop, Anya, and I'll stop." He waited.

"I want you, Bastian, I'm just afraid...the pain."

He felt between her legs. She had gone dry. If he took her now, she would feel pain. He dipped his head to lave her nipple. As she let out a soft moan he fingered her sex, rubbing her up and down feeling her grow wetter.

"I will ease myself into you slowly. I'll be gentle. If you want me to stop at any moment, all you need to do is say so, and I will stop. I promise."

Her hips began to rock into him, and her body became relaxed. When he had her mindless with need once again, he guided his shaft to her entrance.

She gasped at the first feel of him. He had to struggle against his need to thrust deep and hard. She needed slow right now. Her eyes had closed

tight.

“Anya, look at me.”

She did.

“I won't hurt you. He eased in a little further, rubbing his thumb over her clitoris. “I only want to make you feel good.” With maddening slowness, he filled her inch by inch. “Gods, Anya, you feel so good, so tight.” As if she agreed, Anya moaned again and shifted her hips to take more of him. “Are you ready for more?”

“Yes.”

Shoving further into her, she took him to the hilt.

She cried out, gripping his shoulder.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No. It feels good.”

In a slow rhythm, he eased in and out of her, trying to keep himself from bucking too hard. In and out, he basked in the exquisite feel of her soft flesh around his shaft. He dipped his head to take one of her deliciously plump nipples into his mouth. Her sounds were encouraging and soon she was writhing beneath him. Her nails dug into his back while she cradled him between her legs.

Before long, he was driving into her, encouraged by her eager cries of pleasure. Her legs widened for him, and her back arched, causing her breasts to press against him. She was the most beautiful creature he'd ever beheld. Again he felt his fangs emerge, and the urge to bite her, claim her, was almost too difficult to resist.

She looked up, glancing at his fangs, and then met his eyes. She didn't look afraid. She looked wanton. She pulled him to her and licked his lips. He hissed out a breath, hips bucking wildly.

“Anya!” he grated, both fighting his urge, and losing himself to her warm sheath.

Bowing her back, she cried out. Her sex convulsed around his shaft, milking him. He soon followed her with the most mind-blowing orgasm he'd ever experienced. On and on it went for both of them, until they were both drained and fatigued from the onslaught of pleasure.

He slumped on top of her, holding himself up by his elbows so not to crush her. They struggled to catch their breaths. Anya's legs were still wrapped around him, her hands rubbing his arms, his chest, his back, as if she couldn't get enough of touching him. He rolled to lie beside her and pulled her against him. She nuzzled her face into the crook of his neck. He couldn't get enough of her either.

“That was amazing. I never thought it could be like that. Thank you.”

He couldn't help but tease her. “Anytime, just let me know the next time you're in need, and I'll drop everything to come running.”

Her soft giggle was the last thing he heard before drifting into sleep.

Anya woke to a heavy need. Wetness pooled between her legs as Sebastian's thick finger played there. Her nipples were hard, and her body was making itself ready for him.

She peeked one eye open. Gazing down at her with his head propped up on one elbow, Bastian's grin was wicked. “Good morning.” His voice had already gone husky and she knew he must be erect. “I'm at your service.”

She couldn't help but laugh. And what he was doing to her right now was nothing short of amazing. Never had she thought sex could be so wonderful. Vaguely, she suspected it could only be so with Sebastian.

Closing her eyes, she reveled in his touch. He continued to pet her until he had her panting, chest heaving, body aching. When she neared the apex of her climax, he raked his tongue against her nipple forcing an explosion of ecstasy. Riding her through it, he dipped a finger inside, heightening her pleasure.

“You're so beautiful. And your taste, you've got me addicted.”

Through her haze, she watched as he moved between her legs and began tonguing her there. Still high from her first orgasm, she cried out when the second began to build.

A hard masculine groan vibrated through her core and she shook with unmitigated pleasure. Fisting the sheets, her head thrashed back and forth from the ferocity of her release. Her back arched, nails digging into whatever they could find. Still he raked his tongue over her sensitive flesh.

When she went limp, he kissed his way up her body, stopping to pay close attention to each breast. “Do you want me inside you?”

It took her a moment to comprehend what he meant. He was asking permission before he took her. She loved that about him, but what he didn't know was that she was helpless to refuse him. He could do anything he wanted, whenever he wanted.

She looked down at his thick shaft. The size was daunting. Though last night she had felt how large he was, she hadn't seen it through the darkness. But the pleasure she remembered taking from him flooded her with renewed desire, as if he hadn't just given her two incredible orgasms.

She nodded. “Yes.”

With a relieved groan, Sebastian shoved himself inside her. Not hard, but not as gentle as the night before. Her mind flooded with bliss and she could only wish he did it again. He didn't disappoint. Sebastian had made sure she was slick and ready for him.

Cupping her backside as he thrust into her, Sebastian watched her with nearly molten eyes. His movements quickened. Taking her mouth with his, he swallowed her cries of satisfaction. She wanted him harder, deeper. Without words, he obliged, and her third orgasm of the day outshone them all. She could feel her core squeezing and pulsing around his shaft, as the rest of her body writhed under him.

Soon after, he followed her with his own release. His teeth once again came over her neck with a soft pressure. For some reason, her heart raced with anticipation. But he only held them gently against the tender flesh of her neck while he lost himself to his pleasure. After a moment, he rolled to his side, pulling her back to his chest. He nuzzled her hair and held tight as though he never wanted to let go.

But he would let go, she reminded herself. She was still leaving the ship after the mission's completion. Not only because everyone was in danger from Darius, but because—though he looked at her like no man had before—he couldn't possibly want to keep her.

She's been a slave. And she knew how completely unworthy she was of a man as honorable as he. Yes, she would leave, even though having his warmth against her body felt more like home than anything she'd ever known. She would miss this greatly.

She felt him kiss the back of her neck. Then her shoulder. And just like that, she forgot her woes. Smiling she turned in his arms to kiss him back. He nipped lazily at her bottom lip.

She nuzzled into the crook of his neck, and the cold metal of his necklace pressed against her cheek. When she plucked at it curiously with her fingers, she felt his energy suddenly change from the lazy relaxed heat of a lover, to something as hard and cold as the chain.

“We should get ready for the day. I'm due in the control room soon, and Cale will be very put out if you don't show for his training this morning.”

“Sure, of course.”

He moved away from her and began to gather his clothing. “I'll shower in my own room.” After quickly dressing, he moved to the door.

“Bastian?”

He glanced over his shoulder. “Yeah?” His tone wasn't harsh or short, but there was something hollow in it. Anya took a moment to probe his

energy. Confusion and apprehension rolled off him in thick waves.

Was he displeased with her? Did he regret being with her?

“Never mind.”

Sebastian nodded before turning to disappear into the hallway.

Anya's mind was in turmoil all morning. She couldn't fathom what might have caused the change in Sebastian. She must have replayed the morning's events a thousand times in her mind.

Cale had offered an effective distraction during training. With uncharacteristic eagerness, he had her recount her struggle with Xandar, making overjoyed sounds of approval and showing more liveliness than she'd ever seen from him. His joy at her show of progress lifted some of her despair, for a little while, anyway.

After that, they tussled a bit, but she supposed he was taking it easy on her because, at the end, she didn't have the usual sore muscles and scattered bruises.

In the galley, it seemed she only had time to think. Had she done something wrong? Did he not find pleasure with her? She thought he had, but she was not versed in the ways of lovemaking. Perhaps she had disappointed him so fully to the point of disgust. What if he finally realized he'd been touching a slave? Shame and disgrace flooded her.

Of course that was it.

“Anya!” Marik called. “The cart is ready.”

Anya swallowed a hard lump in her throat. The cart was filled with the usual tasty treats that the crew in the control room would devour.

Regrettably, she would have to face Sebastian's abhorrent stares, but she wouldn't stay as long as last time.

As she pushed the cart through the halls, coming closer and closer to the control room, the feeling inside her grew to the point of panic. If he were to look at her with disdain, she thought she might lose it.

It would be nothing more than what she deserved. How could she think that a man like him might want more from her?

She stood outside the door—five minutes, ten. She couldn't seem to catch her breath—telling herself that the crew inside was growing hungry.

She convinced her feet to move forward and the doors swooshed open. Her heart raced as she tried not to glance at Sebastian, but she peeked out of the corner of her eye. He wasn't looking at her either.

Someone yelled, “Ah, the food is here!”

Still he didn't look. His avoidance was almost worse than if he were to sneer at her. She had to get out of there. She couldn't be around him for another moment. Her eyes were growing hot from unshed tears.

In a mock steady voice, she said, “I'll retrieve the cart at a later time.” Then she forced herself, chin up, to leave as casually as possible. When she was out the door, she picked up her pace, holding back the flood as best she could.

“Anya!” Sebastian's voice called from behind her.

Cringing, she didn't slow her retreat. It didn't take him long to catch her though, and with his long strides he easily kept pace. “Anya?”

“My name is not Anya! It's Analia!”

She could no longer stand him calling her by the endearing nickname. Not when he found nothing endearing about her. His steps faltered, but he recovered quickly. She could sense he was looking at her now, but whatever was displayed in his features, she didn't know. She refused to look.

“Analia,” he corrected in a softer tone. His tone alone threatened to break down all the walls she was currently trying to hold up.

“It's not necessary for you to tell me how appalled you are by what we...by what happened between us. We can agree now to never speak of it again. I will tell no one.”

“Will you stop for a moment?”

“No, I must get back to work. Marik needs me.” Unlike you, she silently added.

Sebastian grabbed hold of her elbow, pulling her to a halt. He turned her to face him, and she furiously studied the floor. “I've hurt you badly haven't I?” He paused, for what? A reaction? She wouldn't give him the pleasure. “I'm sorry. It was unintentional. I should not have left you as I did.”

That got her to glance up. His features looked as pained as she felt. “Please don't bother yourself with guilt. It's natural for you to regret our coupling. Forgive me for pushing you. I know I am unworthy...”

“Shit. I've done more damage than I thought. This is why I tried to stay away from you. I knew I would only hurt you. You are not unworthy. I am.”

Stunned into silence, she could only gape.

“Please Anya, Analia, know that you are the most beautiful...stunning...amazing creature I've ever beheld. You are more than worthy. You are soft, and perfect, and you drive me wild with the mere hint of a smile in my direction. You're smart, and kind, and carry the strength of a goddess.”

“Stop it. I am none of those things.”

“You are all of those things and more. I should be begging you for forgiveness, not the other way around.”

Crossing her arms, she raised an eyebrow and said the only thing she could think of. “Go on then.”

His lips quirked. Slowly, he went to his knees. "Please will you forgive me?"

Feigning bravado, she lifted her shoulder in a half shrug, surprised by his actions.

Sebastian's hands moved up her thighs. She was barely able to stifle a shiver as he let her feel the strength of his hands on her hips before moving higher. Those warm strong hands met flesh when he lifted the material of her blouse.

He placed a soft kiss on her stomach. "Please forgive me."

Her breath had already left her. He found the small of her back, and drew her against him as he kissed his way up her body. He kissed between her breasts, her shoulder, the soft curve of her jaw.

"Forgive me." His breath caressed her skin. This time she couldn't stifle her shiver. Then he smoothed his lips over hers in a soft, sensual kiss that made her mind go blank, and her body grow hot and sensitive.

Against his lips, she rasped, "You are so forgiven." He smiled triumphantly before claiming her mouth, deep and demanding, and she gave herself over to him.

Drawing away, he asked, "Will you come back into the control room?"

At her shy nod, he grabbed her hand and led her back down the hallway, straight to his station. To her complete shock, he sat and pulled her into his lap. She was surprised to find his erection hard against her bottom. Cheeks heating she glanced around the room expecting to see shocked faces. There were a few here and there, but most seemed unaffected, as if it were a perfectly natural thing for her to be sitting on Sebastian's lap.

As she was studying everyone else, Sebastian was studying her, gauging *her* reaction, as though he didn't care what his crew might be thinking. Realization hit her as she locked eyes with him. Sebastian was proving to her that he wasn't ashamed of her. That he truly didn't think her

unworthy. In that moment, the happiness that washed over her was overpowering, radiating from her every cell, becoming a living breathing thing.

Sebastian sucked in a breath. Clutching her hips, he looked at her in awe. “Did you feel that? Did that come from you?”

Shit. She’s done it again; let her guard down where her powers were concerned. Only she didn't know she could project her own energy like that. She replied sheepishly, “I guess it did.”

He studied her expression and asked, “Have you ever done that before?”

“No, never.”

His smile was wicked. “It was for me?”

Blushing deeply, she nodded. His eyes flashed with desire, and she bit her lip, growing wet at the sight.

Resisting the urge to roll her hips, she whispered in his ear, “Bastian, you must get control over yourself.” For if he didn't, she would also lose control. Already she was debating straddling him.

In a low, husky voice, Sebastian replied, “If that's my reward for simply holding you to my lap, I wonder what I'll get the next time I ride you all night.”

Her body shuddered. Of their own accord, her hips undulated against his hard shaft, begging.

Groaning softly, he stilled her movement. “If you don't stop that you'll make me explode in my pants. Then what will my crew think of me?”

The crew!

She glanced around the room. Luckily no one seemed to have notice the heated exchange between them.

Sebastian watched as Anya backed the cart out of the control room. He had reluctantly allowed her to crawl off his lap, when what he really wanted to do was whisk her up to his room and ask for more forgiveness by taking her up against the wall.

This morning in her bed, he had been drunk on her taste, her warm sensual body. He was content to stay there all day and make sure they were both so thoroughly satiated that neither of them could muster the strength to get out of bed. She had been so open and sweet, meeting his every erotic fantasy.

Then she had touched his necklace, bringing forth every hurtful memory of his family's betrayal, reminding him of the reasons that he held onto the necklace in the first place—so he would always remember to keep himself protected. How many times had he been on the verge of claiming her? Too many. If he claimed her and she betrayed him, it would destroy him.

That's why he'd left her in such a hurry. His head was muddled with all the horrific possibilities. Cale's words had run rampant through his mind. "She could be a spy for all you know."

Sebastian had panicked at the thought and had run out of there as though at any moment she would reveal a dark plot to steal his heart and crush it in her bare hands.

He realized he'd never run out of a woman's bed so fast before. Her voice had quivered and still he'd left her. He'd had to. Outside her room, he'd vowed that he would begin distancing himself from her. He would make it clear that whatever was between them would go no further. He swore he would begin to treat her as every other crew member, and definitely not like his mate.

His plans were swiftly defeated.

The moment she'd entered the bridge, he'd been resolved in his plan, kept his gaze straight to the stars, even when he sensed her eyes on him. But then he'd *felt* her emotion. He couldn't explain it at the time, but he instinctively knew it came from her.

Utter devastation.

He'd felt it so strongly it nearly choked the air from his lungs. He'd crumbled instantly. He couldn't stand to see—or rather, feel—her in pain. Pain caused by him. He'd only wanted to distance himself, regain a little control, not to hurt her.

When he'd caught her, and she revealed, in so many words, that he'd made her feel unworthy, he wanted to howl in frustration. He'd caused such a strong, perfect, ethereal creature to feel unworthy...of him! A two-bit merchant with no home and little honor. Marik would beat him to an inch of his life if he knew he'd made her feel anything close to unworthy. He deserved nothing less.

At that moment, he would have done anything to make her smile again, to erase her insecurities, so he could see her as happy as she had been that morning in bed with him.

But the second he'd pulled her onto his lap, something in him slipped and clicked into place. And as he'd watched her glance around the room alarmed, his mind cleared. Then she revealed another facet of her gift. It was like utter joy slamming into him, and he understood that what he'd felt earlier really did come from her. And he would never let her feel like that again.

He decided then and there that he was keeping her.

CHAPTER 15



*H*er newest gift was concerning, to say the least. Releasing the emotion had felt like a mini explosion inside her. Not painful, just different, assuaging. How many new abilities would she discover? Why were they surfacing now?

She suspected it was because she'd felt the emotion so strongly, and she'd never been so happy in her life. It made sense that if she could take in the emotions of others, then she could also project her own. Well, project to Sebastian anyway. No one else seemed to have noticed.

She'd need to get control of her new ability quickly, and keep it under control so she didn't wind up projecting her emotions to everyone around her. So far she'd been keeping her feelings in check.

Her gift could be alarming to others. Though, she mused, Sebastian had seemed elated by it.

Behind the bar, Anya smiled to herself. It made her happy that he didn't think differently because of her gifts.

He doesn't know your real ability. What would he think of you then?

What would he do if he found out he could use her blood as a super fuel? Would he want to use her?

Her smile faded.

In an attempt to clear her mind, she focused her attention on the patrons in the bar. The pub was filled to the brim tonight. Many had heard rumors of the attack, and were asking her to regale them with her story—until a few drinks were had, and then they were inserting their own variations.

Apparently, Calic had spread the word and embellished her role significantly. As the night drew on, her involvement had grown from successful escape to single handedly defeating Xandar with her sword. Xandar was assumed dead, and a massive cover up was thought to be in place. Anya let them say what they wanted. Deep down, most of them knew the story was too outrageous, and she figured they were merely having fun with her.

Most who entered the pub greeted her personally before taking a seat, making comments like, “I always knew something wasn't right with that boy.”

Anya would just smile, nod, and take their drink orders. She really didn't want to talk about Xandar, didn't want to be reminded of him when she was too giddy from this afternoon's encounter with Sebastian.

She wondered idly if he would come to the pub tonight. Or if she would find him in her room waiting for her with his devastatingly arrogant smile and rock hard body. Then she would ruin her own good mood and wonder, what if he didn't come? Or worse, what if he came to tell her he was wrong about her being worthy and took back all those beautiful things he said about her? His words were far too good for her, and she knew it.

Calic entered the pub and flashed Anya a brilliant smile, fang and all. “Ah, my little warrior!” he declared for everyone's ears.

Anya felt herself blush. “You must stop lying to everyone,” she ordered.

“Hell no! My version is way better.”

Marik slipped in behind Calic, slapping him on the back. “Don't listen to him, Anya. You did very well for yourself. Even if you didn't flip him over your back and roundhouse kick him to the floor, before smashing his brains in with your fist.”

She laughed. In a teasing voice, she said, “Oh, that does sound close to the actual events, although it was the fireballs from my eyes that crushed his skull.”

“No, it was lasers.”

“Ah, that's right. How could I forget?”

Calic just shrugged. “Anyone who hears my version will think twice before messing with you. Besides, my reputation as a master trainer is on the line.”

“Hey boys.” Sonya sauntered up to the group. “What can I get you?”

“The usual.”

Anya's heart began to flutter when she spotted Bastian enter the pub. Sudden apprehension took over. He was devastatingly handsome with his spiky black hair. He was covered in a long sleeved, black shirt. She wanted to run her fingers under it to feel his hard muscular chest hidden by all that cloth.

His honey colored eyes locked with hers, and she watched him, unable to look away as all that masculine energy loomed toward her. Shivering, her body reacted instantly.

Trying to keep herself in control, she would have said, “Hi,” or something equally lame, but when he reached her, he wrapped his arms around her, lifted her off the ground, and pressed his lips firmly to hers.

Her mind went blank.

His sensual lips sliding against hers was the only thing that mattered at that moment. He held the kiss and allowed her body to slide down his until her feet reached the ground once more. She could feel every ridge of his muscular chest as she went.

Dimly, she noticed silence around her. She glanced up and was met with shocked faces and dropped jaws. Before she had time to react, however, Sonya began jumping up and down with glee. She pulled Anya into a tight, breath squelching hug.

Marik just slapped Bastian on the back, while Cale made the comment, “Come on, Anya, you can do so much better.”

Anya let out a relieved breath as Bastian reclaimed her from Sonya's grip. She hadn't realized until now that she'd been just as worried about their reactions.

For some reason, Sonya kept stealing glances at her neck, looking confused at first. Then she frowned. “You haven't...”

“No,” Sebastian quickly interrupted. “And it's none of your business.”

Anya noticed the others bristled slightly. “What isn't their business?”

“Anya,” Sonya replied. “Can you help me with the drinks? Boys, you take a seat right there.” She pointed to an empty table, eyeing Sebastian just as pointedly before stalking off to the storage area.

Anya followed and helped prepare the raging infernos that the demons loved so much, tipping the bottle to ring every last drop that she could from it. They would have to drink something else after this.

Sonya was obviously aggravated, forcefully reaching for and setting down bottles with loud clangs that surely must be heard throughout the pub. The whole while, muttering in Demonish through clenched teeth.

As soon as the drinks were mixed, Sonya was out the door, leaving Anya to ponder what she had missed. At the table, the men ended what seemed like a heated conversation as she approach. She handed drinks to both Cale and Sebastian, while Sonya handed one to Marik, keeping one for herself. Anya's beverage had a little less alcohol than the rest.

With an indignant look at Sebastian, Sonya raised her glass. “To courage of the heart.”

“Sonya,” Bastian grumbled.

Sonya shot back her drink and set the empty glass in front of Sebastian before returning to the bar without another word.

Demons were strange with their drinking rituals, Anya thought.

The others sipped their drinks, knowing it was the last of their favorite brew. After a moment of awkward silence, Cale offered a second toast. "We should toast to Anya's first battle won."

With a snort, she replied, "Cale, really, I didn't do much."

Ignoring her, Cale bellowed, "A strong, tough, and resilient chit, with laser eyes and all that shit, a right hook that will put you to the floor and a knee that you really should watch out for."

Anya giggled and buried her face into Sebastian's shoulder.

"Though she wails sometimes at a tiny blister, I'd be honored to one day call her my sister."

At that, Anya froze, unsure if he was serious or joking.

Calic downed his drink. Marik smiled, eyes glittering with a knowing mischief as he swallowed his drink. Sebastian waited for her gaze to move to him before he downed his as well.

Her mouth went dry.

"You know, Sebastian!" Sonya stomped toward them, angry and determined. "I never thought I'd see the day I'd lose all respect..."

Marik cut her off. "Settle down, luv. Just because it hasn't happened yet doesn't mean it won't. It's obvious they're both lost, it's only a matter of time."

Sonya bristled. "It had better. If you are cold hearted enough to just... I'll never speak to you again."

Sebastian chuckled. "I would think you would want to punish me, not reward me."

Sonya stomped to the bar, baring her teeth in a silent growl.

Anya sat speechless, trying to decipher the strange conversation, still dazed from Calic's rhyme and the way Sebastian had looked at her. And

what were Sebastian and Sonya arguing over?

Before she could request clarification, Sebastian stood, forcing his chair back with the back of his knees. When he reached out his hand, in a silent request for her to accept it, she wondered if it was some significant gesture.

Then she noticed a group of people leaving for the pool. Anya's mind instantly flashed to Sebastian's wet, almost naked body, his arms securely holding her above water's surface. Her arms clinging to him, her legs around him...

"Are you ready to go?" Sebastian asked, breaking her mind away from the intimate image.

She slipped her hand into his.

At first, Anya thought she had gotten herself turned around again, her sense of direction confused once more, but soon she realized Bastian wasn't taking her to the pool. With reserve and command, he forged ahead, her hand still within his. It was warm and calloused, and reminded her of the way it felt on her bare flesh. She shivered at the thought.

"Are you cold?"

"No."

Now that he'd broken the strange silence that had fallen between them, she felt it was time to start bombarding him with the questions that had been raking her mind since they left the pub.

"What were you and Sonya arguing about? What did Calic mean? For that matter, what did Marik mean? Where are you taking me?"

A robust chuckle rolled out of him. He pulled her to a stop. “We're here.”

“The control room?”

He gestured to a small corridor to the side. Nestled a few feet in were a set of metal stairs spiraling up, curving around smooth cylinder walls. She'd passed this corridor before, but hadn't thought much of it.

Every step was carved intricately and looked to be handmade, a different pattern etched into the metal. Why hadn't she noticed these stairs before? Maybe because this particular corridor seemed to have been designed to look uninteresting, ordinary, and somewhat hidden. The stairs offered an intriguing promise that something magnificent lay at the crest, something that deserved an entrance of such dramatic elegance.

Anya gave Bastian a questioning look before beginning her ascent. The stairs were solid, sturdy under her feet, and clanged dully as she climbed. Bastian followed behind.

At the top was a door, same as any on the ship, but it didn't automatically open as she approached. Bastian moved in beside her and pressed a few buttons on the key pad. The door swooshed open. Without hesitation, she entered the room, eager to see what was inside.

She was not disappointed.

The room was a dome, almost entirely open to space. Nearly the entire ceiling to floor curve was a transparent wall, gifting her with a strikingly immense, infinitely starry backdrop. In the distance she could see multicolored space-dust fanning out from what she assumed was another mining zone. The brightness of it lit the room in a rainbow of colors, but she couldn't tear her gaze away from the cosmic cocoon, eyes darting back and forth, trying to see it all at once.

Bastian eased himself behind her, resting his hands on her hips. “Beautiful, isn't it?”

“Mm-hmm. What is this place?”

“The captain's quarters.”

His room?

She looked around. Sure enough, there was a bed—a large bed—covered in plush dark sheets and pillows, positioned so that, when laying on it, one could stare out at the awe-inspiring view. There was what looked like a minibar and a seating area with matching plush chairs and a mismatched couch. A familiar looking couch.

She gasped.

It was the old couch from her room. The one that Sebastian callously took away and then sweetly replaced with a more comfortable one. He'd given her a couch from his room, switching it with hers.

Behind her, Bastian rubbed his hands along her hips and sides, allowing her to take everything in. Unconsciously, she was leaning her weight against him. The man was playing into her every desire. Her every dream, manifested in the male standing at her back, who was now moving his hands across her stomach. A strong, confident, yet tender male. A male who would protect her. A male who would never hurt her, or allow any other to do her harm. A male who could show her things she'd never seen before, unleash her passion and match it with his own.

She swallowed hard, realizing she was falling head over heels for Sebastian.

As if he felt the change in her, he turned her to him and took her lips the way she loved, as if they were his to do with as he pleased. She eagerly opened for him, knowing she should retain some measure of control, but her mind was no longer working correctly. Her body screamed for more of him. To give him anything he wanted. To give him all of her.

“Anya.” Her name on his tongue was thick with lust, sounding almost painful. Grabbing her backside, he ground his hardness into her, making her wild with need. “I want you, Anya. So bad. I want you to be mine, forever.”

Warning bells went off in her head as she remembered something Darius would say to her.

You are mine Analia. You belong to me.

Darius' voice in the back of her mind sobered her, instantly killing her desire. She backed away from Sebastian. With his strong arms around her, she wouldn't have been able pull away if he hadn't allowed it.

No longer in his embrace, the air chilled her and her body nearly wept from the loss of him, but she forced herself to continue her retreat. His hardened gaze followed her every move, as if any moment he would lunge for her. Her heart was racing and she was finding it difficult to swallow past the lump in her throat. "What do you mean?"

For a long while he just held her gaze.

With surprising fortitude, she demanded, "Tell me!"

He softened and then said, "My kind believes that for every one person, there is another. A predestined, fated mate. I believe you are mine."

"Yours?" she said in a flat, disbelieving tone.

"Yes," Sebastian continued. "When I claim you, you will be mine. For the rest of our lives there will be no other for you but me, and no other for me but you." He watched the emotions play across her face. Fear. Apprehension. Watched as she distanced herself farther, shaking her head.

Hating the space between them, he struggled not to take a step toward her. He needed to tread carefully here, but was afraid he was doing a poor job of it.

“Claim me?” She was growing more frightened by the minute.

“It won't hurt. It's supposed to bring the female pleasure.” He paused, wondering how best to phrase it. She silently urged him on. “While we are in the midst of making love, I would bite you, take your blood into me, thereby marking you, and claiming you as mine.”

Her jaw dropped in horror. “You can't mean that I would belong to you.”

“You want me, just as I want you. I can protect you. *We* can protect you.” She was going to reject him. He should want her to, did want her to. He'd never desired a mate. But he could not imagine living the rest of his life without her. He needed her.

“I do want you,” she said with a sigh. “But I will not consent to being owned by you. And no, you cannot protect me. Whether you like it or not, I am in danger. So are all of you. I've put you all at risk! He will kill you if he finds me here. Nothing of this ship will be spared.” She slumped onto a chair sinking her face into her hands. “I must leave as soon as the delivery is made. It's the only way to keep everyone safe.”

“No!” Sebastian roared. “I will not let you leave.”

The hurt in her eyes speared him with regret for his tone, but her talk of leaving cut him to the core. Never mind she'd thought to protect him and his crew. He couldn't imagine leaving her. How could she possibly imagine leaving him?

“You would keep me against my will?”

“For your own protection? Yes.”

A quivering lip betrayed her feelings before she hardened her features. She stood and gave him an indignant glare, burning with disappointment as she glided passed him. He heard the door open and close. When he turned to look, she was gone.

He had imagined this night going so differently.

Anya ran down the halls of the ship, sucking back her devastation. He'd displayed no hesitation when he told her he would keep her against her will. He hadn't even offered an apologetic tone. She'd seen it in his eyes, felt it to her bones that he was telling the truth. He would lock her up if he had to. Keep her in a room, alone. Maybe he would visit every day, maybe not. Tell her he was sorry, but it had to be this way.

She would fight him, of course, wouldn't allow herself to once again be locked away. Escape would be her only goal. Knowing now, what freedom was, she could never go back to how things were. Not without losing her will to survive.

How long would it take before she grew to hate him for it?

Winded, she slowed her pace. If he was coming after her, he would have caught up by now. It was wise of him to let her go considering how angry she was at the moment.

How could he think to threaten her freedom? Did he expect her to thank him for it? Arrogant demon! He even seemed shocked by her refusal to accept him as her new owner. How could that have possibly surprised him?

Absently, she wandered the halls, not really seeing where she was going, growing weary with anger seething in the pit of her stomach. Making her way through the ship, she headed toward the one place that had given her the greatest sense of tranquility.

The Sanctuary.

As she entered, the essence of life flooded through her, dancing its way up her spine. Breathing in the air, she felt refreshed, slightly calmer. Moving farther into the room, she avoided the corner where Sebastian had

kissed her for the first time—she would not even think of it—and continued to a patch of grass, plopping herself down.

Blocking out her sorrow and focusing only on her surroundings, she stayed there until everything became muted. Until her strained emotions subsided. Until her eyes grew heavy.

Sebastian buried his head in his hands. It had come out all wrong. He'd meant to tell her how he felt about her, that he couldn't live without her. He'd meant to tell her that, with him, she would want for nothing. Would always have anything she desired. How he would cherish her, spoil her... love her.

He'd meant to tell her he loved her.

Instead, he'd told her he would lock her away if she ever tried to leave him.

Idiot.

His heart had been hammering with fear that she would refuse him, stumbled on his words because of it. His calm, cool demeanor that he hid behind so often was now a hindrance, keeping him from blurting out his feelings for her like some lovesick pup.

“Dammit!” His voice echoed through the empty room. He had wanted to chase after her and beg for her to let him start over again, to let him explain. But he sensed if he tried to force her back, she would break. Her final look at him, as if he were some evil thing she needed to escape, had torn at him from the inside.

He would let her cool down a little and talk to her tomorrow. Try to explain things better.

Anya woke, surprised to find she'd fallen asleep in the Sanctuary. Waking to the beautiful sounds of running water and the sweet smells of blooming flowers was wonderful. Stretching her stiff limbs, she basked in it.

Her drowsy mind came into focus. With a scowl, she recalled the conversation from last night, and was seething anew. The bastard had threatened to cage her. If he approached her today, she was going to give him piece of her mind.

Ready for a fight, she stalked toward the training room.

If she was seething when she left the Sanctuary, she was downright maddened with rage when she entered the training room, picked up her sword, and swung it at Calic without warning.

“Whoa, someone woke up grumpy,” he said, dodging her swing.

“Ha! If this is me grumpy, then I'd love to see myself enraged,” she replied, swinging again.

Calic had already grabbed for his sword, and blocked her next attack. “I take it last night didn't go so well.”

“You think? It's shocking that a woman doesn't throw herself at every male who threatened to rob her of her freedom. What is it with you demons anyway?”

“Take away your freedom?”

“Yeah, your arrogant brother told me he wanted to claim me so I'd belong to him, and told me if I left the ship, as originally planned I might add, he would lock me up. Is that a normal demon mating ritual? Build a girl up and then rip her apart from the inside out? Lock her up until her will is gone and she gives in? Is that how you took your...” Anya clamped her mouth shut. Cale's features turned dark. As soon as she'd said the

words she wished she could take them back. But it was too late. Her anger had overridden her brain. "I'm sorry," she said lowering her sword. "Cale, I'm sorry."

Cale's body had gone tight, his features rigid. "All I'm hearing is your ignorance! You know not of what you speak."

She opened her mouth to apologize again, but he cut her off.

"Quiet!" He threw his sword to the side. It landed with a loud clang, making Anya jump. "Sit!"

She dropped to the floor where she'd stood. Sword at her side, she watched Calic. His energy had gone from amused to murderous in three-point-two seconds. Lost in her rant, Anya had forgotten Cale's history. His own mate had hurt him badly. She couldn't imagine a worse feeling, loving someone who could deceive without remorse.

Cale was pacing, trying to calm himself before he dealt with her. He took a deep breath, giving her his profile. "It sounds like Sebastian was a dolt about it. And now you're being a dolt." He took another deep breath. "Tell me what happened."

Anya hesitated a moment, gathering her thoughts. "He said he believes I'm his mate. He said he wanted me to be his forever. He said once he bites me, I would belong to him." *And he would belong to her*, her mind supplied. She vaguely remembered his exact words, "there will be no other for you but me, and no other for me but you." She shivered. Had she misunderstood everything?

"Do you care for him?"

"Yes." She didn't hesitate.

"Do you love him?"

She nodded, replying, "Yes."

"But you're afraid."

Anya only nodded in response. Cale's anger had quickly receded, though his hurt bubbled near the surface. Guilt tore through her.

“It's not like you'll become his slave after he marks you.” Cale gave a low chuckle. “If anything, it's the other way around. When a male demon takes a mate, he becomes obsessed with pleasing her any way he can. He'd do almost anything to keep her happy.” Calic paused for a moment with a distant look on his face and the barest smile, as if he were remembering some event in his own past. “The way Bastian dotes on you now? You would be treated no less than a queen.”

“But he said he would never let me leave, even if I wanted to.” *Which I do*, she told herself. *I must*.

Calic waved a hand in dismissal. “That's to be expected. After a mate is found, there is nothing a male won't do to keep her by his side. When my mate would take a trip into town and was gone too long I would be uneasy until she returned, and that was after I had claimed her. If I'd known she was my mate and had not claimed her, I would have chased after her, ripped the town apart looking for her, until I knew she was safe.”

“You loved her very much, didn't you?”

Calic bowed his head. “There can be no matehood without love.”

“That's a nice thought.”

“Not a thought. Scientific fact. We can sleep with a woman, take one as a companion if we please, but without love, our bodies are unable to make the proper chemicals needed to claim a life mate. When the chemicals are activated, we are driven, sometimes primitively, to mark our mates.”

Anya's heart stopped, then revved into hyper-speed. Sebastian had said he believed she was his mate, then later he'd said, “*When* I claim you,” not, “*If I can* claim you.” As if he knew he would be able to.

Was he telling her he loved her? How many times had she seen his fangs at the ready before he backed himself away? And each time she was instinctively unafraid, shockingly eager, to be honest.

Cale was watching her with intent, reading her thoughts through her expressions. With a tilt of his head, he gestured to the door.

Anya had never run so fast in her life, dodging unsuspecting people wandering the halls, on her way to the control room. Only one thing registered in her mind: *Sebastian loves me*. That was all she needed to know, all she needed to hear come from his lips. Darius be damned. They would find a way to keep everyone safe. She had faith in Sebastian's ability as a captain to keep the ship hidden. After Sebastian tells her he loves her, and after the lovemaking to follow, she would tell him about Darius. And together they would figure out a way to evade him.

Why did everything have to be so far away on this ship? She was barely halfway there. The image of their future together invaded her mind. Silly old dreams that she'd never thought would come true: Sebastian, holding their beloved children in his arms, smiling at her with that wicked grin of his. Their children would be beautiful, half demon half whatever-she-was. That was something else they could discover together.

Anya was smiling as she raced through the control room doors. Then her stomach dropped into her feet. Her throat turned to ash, and her lungs ceased working.

Like a nightmare made flesh, Darius was scowling down at her.

CHAPTER 16



A nya dove for cover, which happened to be only a few feet away—an extruding part of the wall that would hide her from Darius—but she leapt as if it were ten feet away, succeeding not only in shielding herself, but also slamming her shoulder into the hard wall.

It didn't hurt. She only noted that it should have hurt.

Her body had gone instantly numb. Also noted, was the fact that she couldn't breathe, trying to remain silent while gasping for air. A hot white flood of terror blasted through her. Her body suddenly lost all strength. Unable to hold itself up, she slid down the smooth metal wall until she lay huddled on the floor. There she froze, with her rapid heartbeat drumming in her ears, and her throat burning for breath.

It was possible Darius hadn't seen her, she quickly assured herself.

Sebastian stood at his console, staring straight at Darius' face displayed on the large screen at his front. His lips were moving, but she couldn't comprehend what he was saying. The rush of blood from her too-fast beating heart obscured her hearing. Sebastian must have noticed her entrance, and clumsy attempt at finding cover, but he looked as he always did—calm, confident, and arrogant, as if she wasn't there.

Did he just smile? At Darius! At the scourge of my existence!

Her breaths were still coming short and her vision was dimming. He's here, He's here, her mind kept repeating, as if she didn't already know that. *He's found me! What have I done?*

I've condemned everyone.

Sebastian seemed blissfully unaware of the danger peering back at him, looking calmly into the eyes of a murderous psychopath and... grinning. Anya needed to warn him. Needed to tell him to get away before it was too late. Before they were all destroyed, by the monster lurking ever closer.

Gripping her neck with one hand, she tried to will her throat to work properly. She couldn't get enough air. The harsh pounding of her heart was becoming painful. With shaky fingers, she clutched her chest, attempting to take slow, deep breaths to calm herself. Luckily she hadn't eaten yet today, because her stomach was ready to evacuate.

Vision dimming, she took one last pleading look at Sebastian before she was sucked into unconsciousness.

Sebastian tucked Anya into his bed. She was still unconscious, but her skin was once again warm, her breathing normal at last.

Just after she'd passed out, and he was able to cut transmission with Darius, he'd finally—after painstakingly trying to ignore her panicked state, while engaged with Darius—wrapped her in his arms and tried to wake her.

Her skin was freezing and her lips were turning blue. She'd gone into a severe state of shock.

After ordering his crew to send for the doctor, he'd raced her up the stairs and held under the warm water, squeezing her tight against him until she had stopped shivering. Then, out of the shower, he'd stripped off her wet clothes, put her in one of his shirts, and laid her under the covers.

The doctor came and went, confirming that she had most likely experienced a traumatic shock, and she just needed to rest. He'd offered to house her in sickbay until she regained consciousness, but after a quick glance at Sebastian, he wisely recanted before leaving her to Sebastian's care. He requested to be informed when she woke.

Sebastian slipped under the covers and pulled her against him, her back to his chest, offering her the warmth from his body. Resting his hand between her breasts, he allowed the beating of her heart to soothe his anxiety for her.

Now he knew the truth. Knew who had hurt his Anya. Who he needed to kill.

During the conversation with Darius, Sebastian had been pushed to the Edge. While in that muddled and crazed state, he had never had to display so much self-control in his life.

He replayed the events in his mind.

Soon after he had woken this morning, regarding his empty bed and thinking Anya should have been in it, he'd tried to find her. Her room was empty so he'd tried the training room. In an irritated tone, Cale informed him she hadn't shown up yet. Sebastian didn't stick around long enough for Cale to start griping about punctuality. It was obvious she was avoiding him, but he was sure he'd see her at lunchtime when she brought the cart of food. He had planned to speak with her then.

But as soon as he entered his control room, the crew roared at him in a panic. A large ship was detected coming straight for them.

Ordering the crew to their stations, his instinct to protect took over and they prepared to defend *Marada*. Energy was diverting to the shields, as

the large ship drew closer. Then recognition had gripped him, and a sinking feeling had developed in the pit of his stomach.

This was no coincidence.

“It's The *Extarga*. We're being hailed,” Aidan announced.

There was one reason, and one reason only, that would bring Darius this far into the warring zones. Sebastian plastered his face with a relaxed arrogance that felt more forced than it ever had before, and opened transmission.

“Darius,” he greeted with a false nonchalance, while envisioning his hands squeezing around the man's neck. “What a surprise to see you here in the zones. I didn't think you ventured this far, careful of the pirates. We've been targeted once already.”

“I did not track you down for a friendly chat. I have urgent business.” His tone was bored, as if it were routine to chase down a merchant ship through one of the most dangerous coordinates in space.

“Track us down? This isn't about our latest contract is it? We settled the bill. Negotiations are long finished.”

“This has nothing to do with that, though an incident did occur, possibly the same day.”

“Now Darius, my men unloaded every last piece of cargo...”

“This is not about the cargo!” Exasperation poked through his bored tone.

Sebastian's forced smile made him feel like his face was going to crack. But he knew from experience that it was believable. If he was good at one thing, it was controlling his outward appearance, even when inside he was seething. “Oh. Then how can I help you?”

Darius wasted no time. “A dangerous convict escaped my prison around the time of our dealings. I'll need to send some men aboard to search your ship.”

He ground his teeth together, quickly calculating the weapons to ship ratio. The *Extarga* was a massive ship, equipped with advanced weaponry, much of which Sebastian had sold to him over the years. There was no way *Marada* could take it in a fair fight.

“A convict? You want to search my ship for a convict?” His voice was disbelieving. “Are you accusing me of harboring a criminal from your ship?” He let out a short laugh.

“No, I believe a mentally ill convict has stowed away on your ship. I would like permission to come aboard.”

“Captain Darius, have you seen the size of my ship? There's hardly room for my crew. Not to mention, we've not been near your ship for months. I think if a man was hiding on my ship we'd have noticed by now.” Sebastian's crew laughed, as if on cue, at the absurdity of it.

Most of them had already become painfully aware of the situation. An undertone of unease flooded the room. Many of the crew had grown fond of Anya and didn't want to see her taken away any more than he did.

“It's not a man I'm looking for,” Darius nearly growled.

“A woman criminal? Surely you are joking. Captain, my crew is mostly men. Trust me. A woman would have an even harder time staying hidden on this ship.”

The crew hooted and hollered with not-so-fake enthusiasm.

Darius continued in a drab tone. “I know it seems farfetched, but in good conscience I cannot rest until I've found this person. Yours is only one of many ships I intend to search. I'm sure I'll find nothing, but I must be thorough.”

“I commend you, Captain,” Sebastian replied on an almost sarcastic tone, though his rage flared at Darius' act of playing the hero. “Most people, these days, would just write it off and let the man—I mean *woman*—go instead of wasting valuable resources. Tell me what did this criminal do that merits such a vigilant chase?”

“She's a thief and a murderer, without conscience or morals. She had come aboard my ship disguised as a stranded victim of pirates, and betrayed our hospitality at the first opportunity.”

“Well, there's your first mistake. Pirates would never leave behind a woman. She'd be part of the take.”

Again the crew laughed and hollered.

“Yes, thank you, I'll remember to seek your council in the future.” Disdain dripped from his words. “She had killed many of my crew, intending to take over, before I put a stop to it.”

“Fascinating. Is this a large woman we speak of, burly perhaps?”

“No, she's just under five and a half feet.”

Sebastian made his eyes widen in shock. “Such a wee creature caused you so much trouble?” He coupled his surprise with a mocking smile. “Between you and me, I wouldn't be spreading that around.”

Darius kept his features cool, but his eyes revealed the anger Sebastian was inciting. Good. It will throw him off balance.

“Just let me aboard so I can have a quick look, and I'll be on my way.”

“Unfortunately, I cannot.” He didn't miss the flash of warning in Darius' eyes.

Just then someone entered the control room. He didn't have to look to know who it was. His every cell was tuned to her presence, her scent. He used all his strength to keep himself in check. He couldn't look at her, though he badly wanted to.

Anya inhaled a sharp gasp and flung herself to cover.

Although Darius couldn't see her, he would be able to hear her if she didn't keep quiet. From the corner of his eye, it didn't seem she could make much noise, even if she wanted to. He knew she was in the throes of a panic and could do nothing about it, lest he make Darius suspicious. Many of the crew exchanged worried glances, but kept to their posts.

“Why, might I ask, can you not?” Darius continued, unaware. Danger lurked in his tone.

“I’ve recently entered into a contract,” Sebastian explained, exuding the appearance of ease, as if Darius’ pursuit was a trifling matter. “I won’t bore you with the details, but a condition of the contract is that no one is to enter or leave my ship until delivery is made. The Serakians were brought in to activate wards around my ship.” Sebastian never thought he’d be thankful for the wards, and thus a credible excuse. “Feel free to scan the ship and see for yourself.”

“Convenient.”

“Convenient? It’s damn inconvenient. Many of my crew have been more than a month without a woman. Their tempers are getting difficult to tolerate. Whatever happened to the good old honor system?” Sebastian allowed himself another glance from the corner of his eye. Anya was slumped on the floor, pain etched in her features. “Tell you what. I’ll have my crew do a thorough search of the ship and get back to you in an hour.”

“How far until your drop-off? We’ll follow you,” Darius pushed.

“We still have far to go. You’d be waiting months. We came through the warring zones hoping to shave off some time, but the pirates have been a nuisance.”

“I thought you said you’d only been attacked once.”

“Yes, but we’ve had to double back and change our route to avoid further conflict.” Sebastian was great at lying when it came to protecting his family. “I promise you we will do a thorough search. I’ll just need to tell the men that there’s possibly a wee woman hiding on the ship and the first one to find her...well, you get the idea.”

“No!” Darius’ outburst hushed the renewed laughter of the crew. “No one touches her!”

“Okay.” *Especially not you, you bastard, you’ll never touch her again.* Sebastian was going to cut off Darius’ hands and shove them down his

throat. Along with any other appendage that might have touched his Anya. “No one touches the wee criminal.” He'd used up the last of his patience and control to keep the venom out of his voice.

As soon as the transmission was cut, he lunged for Anya. His chest squeezed with fear at finding her unconscious.

Anya awoke feeling like she'd been tossed into outer space, reeled back in, and tossed out again. Her brain was pounding in her skull. Her body felt shaky and weak. Her eyes felt strained, and her lungs hurt. She sensed Sebastian at her back, holding her close to his chest and sought deeper contact, rubbing herself against him. As if he knew what she needed, his arms tightened around her.

“How are you feeling?” His voice rumbled softly next to her ear.

“Mmmm.”

He was warm and smelled like a purely intoxicating man.

How did she feel? She was here, in his arms. He loved her. That was all that mattered. He must have forgiven her after their argument, but for the life of her she couldn't remember making up with him. How did she get in his bed?

Her eyes shot open as clarity sparked through her. “Oh, gods!”

Darius is here!

“It's okay, Anya. I have everything under control.”

“Oh, gods. Oh, gods,” she chanted in a panicked whisper. Her throat was scratchy and tight. “We have to go!” She studied her surroundings. It looked like she'd been lying peacefully in his room as though nothing were wrong, as though evil incarnate wasn't lurking close by. Had she imagined it all?

No. He's here.

She could sense the familiar hum of *Extarga*.

Then she made the mistake of looking out the great domed window. The Hell Ship was leering down at her, like a malicious hideous beast, skulking in the darkness of space, a maleficent hunter who had found its prey and was about to strike with deadly accuracy.

Feeling exposed, her body jerked to get out of sight. Bastian held her before she could fling herself out of bed.

“Stop it! He’ll see me!”

Sebastian's big body pinned her. “No, he won't. You can't see in from the outside. It's like a one-way mirror, reflective on the outside.”

That was a relief, if only a small one. “Bastian, why are we still here? We have to go! Now! He’ll destroy you!”

“I've bought us some time. I might be able to convince him you're not here at all. He’ll move on if I can.”

“What?” Her struggles ceased.

“He said he had many ships to search.”

“Did he tell you he's looking for his slave?”

“No. You've become a notorious lady killer.”

“A what?”

“A dangerous con artist who he seeks to rid the universe of. He's playing the honorable vigilante.”

“You're joking with me.”

“Nope. And if it's true that he has other ships to search, then that means he's not sure where to find you. The day you escaped, had many ships been scheduled?”

She took a breath, braving a glance past Sebastian at the Hell Ship. “Only a few, but I disabled the security system, changed the codes, and erased two weeks of recorded data.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You did?”

She nodded a little sheepish. “How did you buy time?”

Sebastian repeated the conversation between Darius and himself. His plan was to go down in half an hour, inform Darius that their search came up empty, and hope he was desperate enough to get to his next target and to get out of the warring zones.

“He won't buy it. He'll attack. He won't take no for an answer.”

His brows drew together thoughtfully. “He's wasted a massive amount of resources to follow us here. All to get you back. It doesn't make sense, unless...” Sebastian trailed off, eyes going dark. “Has he mated you in some way?”

“I don't think so.”

Sebastian exhaled a harsh breath. “Does he want to?”

“I don't know.”

“There's got to be a reason he's gone to these lengths to find you, something more than just a bruised ego over losing a slave. Anyone who'd lost a slave would spend a day, maybe a week, looking to recover lost property. After that, they would cut their losses and buy a new one. Darius is hunting you. Why? Is it because of your gifts?”

Oh, gods, he's guessed it.

“I can see from your face that's it.”

She couldn't answer, couldn't tell him. Not yet. She wanted to hold on to her fantasy a little longer. Would he look at her differently if he knew? But if Darius did attack, Bastian would find out what she was. She would have no choice but to show him. She would save these people no matter what, even if the cost was her life. She would give them a chance to escape, to hide.

“Promise me something.” Anya knew her eyes must look stark. They felt like they were glued in perpetual shock. She had to struggle to keep her lip from quivering.

“Anything.”

“Promise me if you...if we get away from Darius, you won't seek him out. You'll take your crew and hide. Keep them safe...okay? And if you see him coming, you'll run as fast and as far as you can. Push the ship as hard as you can to get away.”

He shook his head. “I've vowed to kill him...and I will. And stop talking like you're going away. You're not going anywhere. My crew is strong. They will fight for you.”

“No. Please just keep your ship, your crew, your family safe. Please. I've put everyone in danger, and I have to make it right.”

Eying her warily, he replied, “What do you mean? How do you plan to make it right?”

In a small voice, “I'll think of something.”

Actually, a plan had already formed. It had been in the works since she'd been at leisure to study more closely the workings of the ship, its complicated engines, and the unused warp drive. Sebastian hadn't stocked enough power supply to use it because it had never worked, but what they didn't know was she had all the power they would need, and she would give it all if she had to.

“The look on your face is making me uneasy.”

A strong sense of determination had come over her. This may be her final night with Bastian. “Then kiss me and make it go away,” she cooed.

It was selfish to want him at a time like this, but there were two outcomes for her future. One, she would be captured by Darius, her friends and loved ones killed. Two, she would reveal herself for what she was and cause Sebastian to see her differently. Either way she wanted this last moment of happiness with him, even if she didn't deserve it.

There was a third outcome, a happily-ever-after outcome, one where she would be free to love and cherish Bastian for the rest of her life. But that outcome seemed unlikely at this point. She wouldn't let herself dwell on it.

Sebastian couldn't stand that look on her face any longer. She was both defeated and determined at the same time. In her mind, she had already lost. It seemed as though she didn't believe they would get out of this alive. It pained him that she had so little faith in him to keep her safe.

He would just have to prove it to her.

In the meantime, she had asked him for something, and he would not deny her. He would have to make it quick, instead of pleasuring her at his leisure. For hours, he could explore her body, find what made her quiver with delight and exploit it until she screamed his name. Next time.

Immersing himself in the feel of her soft warm body beneath him, he leaned down and claimed her mouth, more forcefully than he intended. Rewarding him, she gave a small sound of approval and kissed him back with what could be described as desperation. Her arms came around his neck to lock him in place, as if he'd go anywhere when he had her right where he wanted her.

He took a moment to caress her tongue with his before trailing his lips down her jaw to her neck. He gave a small bite, testing the waters. Her body came alive, her breath hitched, and she shuddered. With that, she raised an eyebrow at him, and he gave her a wicked grin. Maybe she wasn't ready to be claimed by him, but her body sure was.

When he covered her breast with one hand, her eyes rolled and her head fell back, body arching to his touch.

Ready indeed.

As quickly as possible, he eased off her and removed her shirt. In the next instant, her hard little nipple was in his mouth. He twirled his tongue over the first peak, then the other. His hands flowed over her body, cupping the tightest, most luscious ass that was ever captured by five fingers. She moaned softly for him, and he took her mouth with his as she pressed her core against his painfully hard shaft.

Driving him mad with lust, she continued rubbing herself against him, but he wouldn't let it be that quick.

Without a doubt, he felt the presence of another male threatening what was his. Not mine yet, he reminded himself. It worried him that she could yet be claimed by another. Leaving her free of his mark went against his every instinct. Time was what she needed. And until now he'd been more than willing to give it to her. Now he felt an urgency deep in his soul, an urgency to finally take her as his mate and an urgency to protect her with his life.

Gripping her thighs, he opened her legs to him, and with his hand, found her warm and slick. He groaned while she sucked in a sharp breath. He loved her reactions. He watched her face as he rubbed her swollen clitoris. Her eyes closed in ecstasy, and then, with a gasp they opened wide as though surprised by the intense pleasure.

The sight of it had him growing harder still.

He inserted one finger, then another, as he sucked one tight nipple into his mouth, pinching it lightly between his teeth then making slow circles with his tongue.

Growing still, a curious expression crossed her face as if she were grappling with a decision. Her gaze flickered to his engorged cock, looking as though she wanted to...Sebastian held his breath when she licked her lips.

“Bastian, could I—”

“Anything you want,” he bit out.

Giving him a tentative smile, she moved from under him, guiding him to the head of the bed with his back against the headboard. Then, in a studying manner, her attention was on his shaft. Her head tilted this way and that, as if she didn't know where to begin. He clenched the bed sheets, determined to let her explore him at her leisure. With a slowness that was maddening, she leaned down until her mouth hovered over his shaft.

His grip on the sheets tightened.

Testing, her tongue flicked out to lick the tip of him. He let free an involuntary groan. She looked up at him and smiled, as if pleased with his reaction. He watched her intensely, eager to see what she would do next.

The pleasure of her sucking him into her mouth was more than he'd ever experienced. He had to fight to keep from bucking his hips. The sound of something tearing registered with his mind, and he loosened his grip on the bed.

Though it was obvious she was new to this, it didn't make it any less sweet. In fact, it made it all the more that he knew she'd never done it for another. It made him feel even more possessive of her than he already was.

She was relentless, sucking and licking and pumping him into her hot mouth. Her soft little moans reverberated through him.

He was tempted to let her have her fill, but he felt he could come any second with her stroking him with her mouth like that, and he wanted to be inside her when he came. As much as it pained him, he pulled her away from his throbbing cock. "You're going to make me come if you keep doing that."

The smile she gave him was nothing short of wicked.

Oh, I am in trouble.

Still resting against the headboard, he grabbed her around the waist and pulled her on top of him, working her down his length. As he penetrated, she threw her head back with a cry of pure satisfaction.

With his hands gripping her waist, he showed her how to move, slow at first, then she took over. Her appetite for pleasure matched his own, and soon both their hips were undulating in unison, their breaths mingling. The sounds she made seemed to be like a drug to him, making him mindless for more of her, for every bit of her.

Vaguely, he realized his fangs were elongating.

Her breasts rubbed against his chest as she moved up and down. Maddening. He gripped her by the hips, fingers on her ass, and forced her hard into him. Her cries were encouraging. Faster and harder he thrust her upon him. When her head fell back once more, her soft neck presented to him. He put his lips to her, his fangs sliding over her tender flesh.

Anya gasped and pulled away. He'd been about to bite her. Emotions ran through her as he continued to give her the most mind-blowing pleasure she'd ever experienced. It didn't surprise her that he would attempt to claim her in the heat of their passion. No, that was almost expected. What surprised her was that she...wanted him to.

But the threat bearing down on them was too great. If he claimed her, and she was taken away from him...the idea horrified her. He would never be able to take another as his mate. And though the image of him with another woman hurt, she wanted him to find happiness, even if it wasn't with her.

Bastian's voice was a low rumble. "Anya," he pleaded. "Give yourself to me. I'll be good to you, I swear. You already have me wrapped around your wee finger." He managed a smile.

Slowly, she shook her head.

His features grew pained.

"Not yet. Please understand. I can't. Not when he's out there." She paused. "What if I...if you'd done it, and I..." She couldn't finish her

sentence.

In a swift move, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to him. “So it's only out of concern for me that you refuse?” When she nodded, he said, “That's silly.” At her raised eyebrow, he quickly added, “But I'll allow it. As soon as I have you to safety, you're mine.” To make his point he thrust hard into her, and they resumed their frenzy.

As their joining became more frantic, she felt his hot seed shoot into her and was instantly overcome with a blinding release that took her breath. With both of them panting, she let her body rest against his muscled chest, absently fingering the metal around his neck.

She felt his body go still.

His reaction reminded her of their first morning together. She could tell something was wrong and it had to do with his necklace. Backing away she, studied him. The moment he looked at her, he relaxed again, as if everything were fine, but—

“Tell me about your necklace.”

He tensed once more. When he didn't answer, she moved to get off him, but he stayed her with his hands on her waist.

“It was a gift from my mother, just before she betrayed us.”

“Why do you keep it?”

“I use it as a reminder. To...protect myself from...” He paused, obviously debating continuing. “You,” he finally said.

She tilted her head at that.

“I thought that finding my mate would be like a death sentence. After what happened to Cale, I thought I should avoid the whole thing altogether.”

A sadness came over her like nothing she'd felt before. He hadn't wanted to find her, had loathed the idea of her. Yet here she was.

“But I was wrong,” he bit out. “I couldn't have been more wrong about anything in my life. I know you would never betray me like that.”

Anya was silent for a moment. "The time I've spent on this ship has taught me that there are people out there who are good, and kind. You've shown me that." She paused. "I spend all my time trying to forget my past, when you wish only to hold on to yours."

"You make it seem so easy."

"It's not easy. A lot of the time I'm pretending to be okay. But it helps when you meet someone who truly cares for you, no matter what you are..." She bit her lip.

Should I tell him?

A light refracted off the necklace, drawing her eye.

Draping her hands around his neck, she unclasped the necklace and then placed it around her own neck. The metal dangled heavy between her breasts. His eyes turned hungry.

"There, now it will always remind you of me."

He gave her a heart-stopping grin, and kissed her with renewed hunger. Then he pulled back, his brows drawn together. Shaking his head, he said, "As many times as I had set foot on that ship, I should have sensed you. I should have caught your scent, torn the ship apart looking for you." He shook his head. "I'm sorry."

"As much as I would have loved being rescued by a big scary demon with horns, claws, and overgrown fangs—"

"Hey, you like my fangs."

She shivered at the thought of his teeth grazing her skin. "Be that as it may, there was nothing you could have done."

"I should have known. Demons are supposed to be able to scent their mates from miles away."

"Then why did it take so long for you to realize what I was to you when I was two feet away?"

"Denial is a powerful thing."

"Then, if you had caught my scent, wouldn't you have just denied it?"

Bastian lowered his head.

“Stop this. It's in the past. You're speaking of things that have no place in the realm of possibilities. I was kept in only the most remote parts of the ship. There's no way you could have known. You have me now. That's all that matters.” She hoped.

In a grave voice, he replied, “I will make it up to you. If it takes me the rest of my life.”

“As long as you're alive, that is gift enough.”

He pulled her close and kissed her with such tenderness. Their foreheads touching, he said, “I have to go.”

CHAPTER 17



After dressing, Sebastian left Anya still nearly naked in his room. As soon as he got rid of Darius, she would again be *fully* naked and in his bed.

She had tried hard to convince him that he hadn't failed her by not sensing her on the *Extarga*. It was possible that he had no way of knowing, but thinking back, he wasn't sure. He realized now that stepping onto that ship *had* felt different, though he hadn't given it a second thought. Like he'd told Anya, he'd never wanted to find his mate.

Could he have perceived his mate in some way and ignored his instincts? Somehow unconsciously convincing himself that she was fine where she was? Was it truly possible that he'd denied her and left her there to suffer? For years?

He touched the chain around his neck. Anya had given it back to him just before he'd left, along with the sweetest kiss to his lips.

How could she look so determined and utterly lost at the same time?

He supposed she imagined the necklace was a parting gift. Something to remember her by. She truly feared she was going back. But there was no way he would allow that. Not when he had just found her.

And, oh, did he want her, like nothing he'd ever wanted before. She was perfect for him in every way. Knowing her now, how could he have ever

not wanted to find her? If he'd had any indication, what a perfect creature she would be, he would have scoured the universe for her.

In bed, Anya had hinted she might accept him when this was over. The thought made his blood fire. Time to deal with the one thing standing in his way.

Darius had wasted no time establishing contact. He was already on the screen, demanding a report when Sebastian entered the room.

“Darius,” he greeted as formally as he could.

“Well?” Darius asked impatiently. “Have you found her?”

“It's just as I thought. There's nothing out of the ordinary on my ship. No little girls out of place.”

Darius remained silent. Leaning back in his chair, he looked down his nose at Sebastian.

Knowing he wasn't convinced, Sebastian added, “I had every available crew member searching. No corridor was left unchecked.”

Eyes growing dark, Darius replied in a somber tone, “I know she's here. I can feel it.”

Sebastian stifled a growl. The bastard was unusually determined. For a mere slave? Why this determination to persist.

Unless...

A terrible suspicion invaded his mind, sinking in his stomach like a lead weight. Was Darius...was he in love with Anya?

Sebastian mentally shook himself. He needed this man away from his mate. Now! With teeth clenched and his voice almost a snarl, Sebastian said, “I can say with one hundred percent certainty that you're wrong. There is no one on my ship who belongs to you. We have a job to complete, and you've delayed us long enough.”

Darius leaned forward. “I want on that ship, Sebastian.”

The screen went black.

Anya paced the room, nervously glancing out the window every few seconds at the Hell Ship. Any moment now that ship could turn away...or not.

Please turn away.

It didn't budge.

Anya sat on the bed, then stood twiddling her fingers together, and paced some more. Bastian hadn't been gone very long, but it should have been enough time to tell Darius she wasn't on board. She had a really bad feeling things weren't going as planned. And if that was the case, she knew what she would have to do and was ready for it. *Marada* would safely get away if it was the last thing she did.

And she feared it might be.

At least she was able to leave something of herself with Bastian, a trinket that hopefully she'd changed the meaning of. She hoped he would use it as a reminder that it was okay to trust sometimes...to love.

An icy chill froze her dead in her tracks, and a dreadfully familiar energy slammed into her—an energy that tore the last of her hope straight from her chest. Her breath left her.

Oh, gods. No!

The *Extarga's* weapons were powering up. Darius was going to attack.

She barely had time to turn before the first shot rocked the ship, then another. Her heart sank in her chest, and adrenalin spiked. This was it. Sebastian had his chance, and it hadn't worked. Now it was her turn.

Thundering her way down the stairs, she burst into the control room, where things seemed to have gone into a strange organized chaos.

Sebastian was screaming orders. "All available power to shields! Aidan! Get us the fuck out of here!"

Someone yelled, "Shields down to eighty-one percent!"

"Let's keep it there!" Sebastian replied.

Another round of heavy blasts shook the ship.

"Shields at sixty-seven percent!"

"Fuck!" Over the loud speaker Sebastian ordered. "All gunmen to their stations! Target the *Extarga's* weapons and fire at will!"

Two more blasts had the crew gripping their stations for balance. With a loud pop, sparks shot out from an electronic box on the wall.

"Shields, forty-nine percent!"

"They're targeting our thrusters!" Aidan yelled.

Just then, Sebastian noticed her standing in the doorway. "Anya, get back to the room. Better yet, go find Sonya and make sure she's okay. We'll get out of this."

Ignoring him, she made her way to Aidan's station.

"Hey," Aidan barked when Anya pushed him out of the way. He reached for his console, and she slapped his hand away. At a loss, he looked toward Sebastian.

Bastian must have been stunned too. The room had grown somewhat quiet, until another blow shook the walls, causing more sparking.

A voice rang out, revealing a note of panic, "Shields at thirty percent, Captain!"

"Anya! This is serious. Get away from Aidan's station."

"Captain!" She addressed him formally to emphasize that she knew perfectly well how serious the situation was. "There is only one way we're going to get out of this alive." She quickly brought up the code for the warp drive, finding the error and correcting it within seconds.

Aidan was watching over her shoulder with fascination. "I can't believe it," he breathed. "It can't be that simple."

Turning to Sebastian, she commanded, “Captain, prepare the ship for warp drive.” Behind her Aidan was scrolling through the code as if seeing it for the first time.

“Aidan?” Sebastian called in question.

“It looks...I mean I can't be sure, but...she may have fixed it.”

Sebastian replied, “Even if it were in working order, we don't have the amount of power needed. Anya, leave this to me.”

Again she ignored his request and moved to a compartment on the wall, just beside where Bastian stood. Opening it revealed a tangle of wires.

The ship shook angrily as three more blasts assaulted the ship's exterior.

“Captain, the shields are down to fourteen percent!”

“Aidan, resume evasive maneuvers. Get us out of here!”

In a strong voice that gathered all her intensity, she said, “Sebastian, you must trust me. Prepare the ship for warp. Now!”

When he shook his head, she pulled out the one wire that would give her full access to the ship's power and, holding it in one hand, she hovered it over her wrist. Sebastian raised an eyebrow.

Gravely, Anya said, “Once I do this, Darius will know, without a doubt, that I am here. He's only playing with you now. He will attack with all his force. Please call the order. Prepare the ship!”

“Anya...”

Another round of explosions tore at the ship. A warning alarm sounded, sparks spewed further from the wall. A fully panicked voice called out over the noise, “Captain! Shields are down to three percent. We can't take another hit!”

With that, Anya shoved the exposed wire into her skin. A small trickle of blood flowed down her arm and into the metal of the wire.

Sebastian's brows drew together in confusion. “Anya?”

The pull of the ship was sharp. It drank from her like a hundred year old thirst being quenched at last. It hurt like hell! More than she thought it would. This was a straight draw, and she wasn't used to that. Soon her wrist became like fire. She schooled her features to keep the pain off her face. Bastian didn't need to see it.

“Uh, Captain? The shields have spiked! They've shot up to ninety-two percent.”

Jaw dropped, Bastian's head snapped to her. The look he gave her was as though he were seeing a stranger, like he'd never truly known her before. She had to force herself not to turn away in shame.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The blasting renewed with a frenzy, each explosion only milliseconds apart, rendering the ship into a continuous vibrative state. With her connected to the ship, the tremendous thundering was like a force onto itself.

He knows!

“Bastian! Do it now!” she pleaded.

“Shields, eighty-five percent.”

Finally, he called over the loud speaker, “Attention, all. Prepare yourselves for warp drive in ten seconds.” He looked back at Anya, his expression unreadable.

Grateful, she nodded. “Run it for as long as you can. Half a minute at least.”

Aidan started the countdown. “Ten”

The fire in Anya's wrist had spread to her elbow.

“Nine.”

In a tone void of emotion, Bastian asked, “Will this harm you?”

“Eight.”

“Shields, seventy-one percent!”

“Seven.”

Afraid he would stop her, Anya lied. "I'll be fine."

"Six."

Extarga continued battering the ship, each blow like a terrible explosion inside her.

"When this starts..." she said to Sebastian.

"Five."

"No matter what you see or hear..."

"Four."

"Don't touch my skin. Okay?"

"Three."

Sebastian steadied his gaze.

"Promise me!"

"Two."

"Why?" he demanded.

"One."

Her vision blurred, going white with nausea as the ship surged into warp. The fire that she'd been able to contain in her arm now swallowed her completely. In vain, she gasped for air that wasn't filled with liquid heat. Her lungs burned, her skin burned, the blood in her veins burned with every merciless beat of her heart.

She gripped her wrist tight to keep the wire in place, and leaned her weight against the wall. It felt as though something were reaching into her and clawing at her insides, the pain worsening with each pull of the ship.

How many seconds had passed?

How much longer would she suffer?

Extarga would not be able to follow as long as enough time had passed in warp. They wouldn't be able to spare the energy, not without her. The thought made her want to smile through the consuming inferno. Finally, she was using her gift for her own purpose, a truly freeing act.

The pain was nearing the point of agony. She bit her tongue to keep from begging for it to stop. Her friends needed her to be strong. Sebastian needed her to be strong.

Impossibly, the fire in her grew hotter. Any second she would burn away. Her eyes were closed, hot tears burning their way down her cheeks. She was afraid to open them and see if her skin was actually aflame. A scream must have escaped her, she could barely hear.

Sebastian's voice penetrated. It sounded so far away. "Anya! Stop! Aidan can't stop it!"

Good. She'd be able to get them as far away as she wanted, as long as she could stand.

Suddenly, she stopped breathing, or her body was using up all the oxygen so quickly that she felt like no air was coming with each heavy draw of breath. Her blood boiled, body contorting from the pain, the suffocating, burning pain. Growing hotter still. She screamed again. Too much pain.

She's suffering!

Sebastian's first instinct was to grab her, but, heeding her words, he remained in place. "Anya! Talk to me!"

She made no sound, no movement. Her jaw was clenched. Was she trying to keep quiet? Keep her pain from showing? He knew she would do anything to protect the people on this ship, but how far would she go? The answer scared him.

"Aidan, cut the warp drive!"

After a moment, Aidan called back. "I...I can't stop it. For some reason I'm locked out." He banged at the computer in frustration.

Anya let out an agonizing sound that tore at his heart.

"Anya! Stop!" he pleaded. She didn't move. She either couldn't hear him or was ignoring him completely. He tried again. "Anya, listen to me! Aidan can't stop it. Whatever you're doing, it's hurting you. Stop this or I will."

She screamed again, pulling her wrist closer into her body...*In an attempt to keep me from it?* Her eyes were closed tight, but tears had begun to escape. Then the strangest thing happened: the tears sizzled on her cheeks before evaporating off her skin.

"Anya! Damn it! That's enough!"

When her whole body became clenched in pain, he took matters into his own hands. He darted to the panel and yanked the wire clean from the wall. Anya sucked in a harsh breath and slumped to the floor. He felt the thrusters shut down instantly.

Scooping her up, Sebastian mindlessly yelled out orders, "Find a place to hide. Scan the area, make sure we're safe. Run diagnostics on the ship. I need to know how damaged it is. Find out where the hell we are. Report to me in ten minutes."

With that he left, racing down the hall, grumbling, "Dammit, Anya. How many times do I need to rush you to the doctor? This will be the last time. You hear me?"

Of course, she didn't. Once more, she was unconscious in his arms. He promised to keep her safe, but it seemed an impossible job.

In his desperate grip, she looked so fragile, so easily broken. But, aside from his sister, she was one of the strongest, bravest females he'd ever met. "You'd better get through this one or I'll rip through the underworld to bring you back myself." Her lips were parted on a breath, but she didn't seem to be taking in any air.

Dr. Oshwald looked slightly disheveled when he entered sickbay. Sebastian lay her down on the bed, then attempted to explain, as best he could, what had happened.

Before he was finished, Cale burst through the doors. “Here you are! What the fuck was that? Did we seriously just warp? What the fuck happened to *her*?”

Oshwald placed one hand over her forehead and one over her heart. “Ow.” He pulled away.

“What is it?” both demons said in unison.

“She's burning, literally. Must be two hundred degrees at least. Didn't you feel it when she was in your arms?”

“Heat doesn't affect demons the same way it might you. Is she alive?”

“She lives, but barely.”

Cale growled, “Well, do something about it, Doc!”

“Both of you out! One demon hovering is bad enough, but two is intolerable.”

Once outside, Cale slapped Sebastian on the back. “Drink?”

Knowing there was nothing he could do to help Anya, Sebastian reluctantly agreed.

“What the hell is going on?” Sonya asked, as Cale approached the bar.

Sebastian was seated in a corner booth, head in his hands.

“How is it possible that we warped? Not that I'm complaining. I was actually starting to get a little worried when the bombing wouldn't stop. The shaking of the ship claimed more than one of my more expensive liquor bottles.” Sonya resumed her nervous cleaning with a dingy rag.

“I haven't got the whole story yet. All I've been able to pull out of him is something about Anya powering the ship.”

“That doesn't make any sense.”

Cale shrugged.

Tossing down the rag, Sonya walked toward Sebastian and sat across from him, straddling a chair. Cale followed with drinks in hand. Sonya had never been a patient chit.

“Can you please explain to me what's happened?” She demanded.

Sensing that he was in great need, Cale handed Sebastian the very large, very strong drink. Sebastian took the glass and ingested it with one swallow.

“We can get you an I.V., mate. Fill it with a hundred proof.”

Sonya impatiently crossed her arms.

“I don't even understand it myself,” he began. “I'll need to speak with Anya to be sure, but, I think Anya fixed the warp algorithm, and then powered the ship...with her blood.”

With that, Cale sat, and took a deep swig of his own drink. He'd known there was something more to Anya, but this?

Sonya dropped her arms. After a moment, she replied, “Where is she now?”

“Sickbay. She was hurt badly doing...whatever it was she did. How could I have let that happen?”

“Did you know what she was planning?”

“No. How could I?”

“Then how could you have known to protect her?”

“She's suffered so much, when I could have stopped it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“She'd been on that ship for years, suffering. How long have we been supplying *Extarga*? How many times have I gone aboard to meet with Darius?” Sebastian's fists clenched. “I should have known! I should have felt her presence. I ignored my instincts. I left her there! Now she's suffering again, because I couldn't keep her safe.”

Cale wondered if he had been in Bastian's place, would he feel as responsible? There is no question that he had loved his mate, but some things are just out of one's control. Sonya seemed to feel the same.

"Sebastian," she sighed. "After seeing you with Anya, the way you are with her, I have no doubt that if you had caught even a hint of her scent, you would never have left that ship until you found her. You can't blame yourself."

"How can you be sure? I denied her for so long when she was so close."

"You denied yourself, not her. You must have been blind to your own reactions to her. When she's in the same room as you, she commands your full attention."

"Is it that obvious?"

"It couldn't have been more obvious if you had painted *this is my mate* on your forehead with an arrow pointing to Anya."

Sebastian laughed. Sonya could always make that happen. Thankfully, Cale was wise enough to let Sonya do the talking. He would have just told him to stop being a pansy and get over it. They had more important things to deal with. Like finishing this damn mission, and getting the fuck off this ship for a couple of hours. He had long exhausted his supply of fresh females.

Anya had been awake for a few minutes but only managed to crack her eyes open for a few brief seconds, scanning for Bastian. She took stock of

her situation. Hurting. On a bed. Still alive. She'd caught a glimpse of Dr. Oshwald. She must be in sickbay. *But where is Bastian?*

Careful to inhale slowly, her lungs burned with each breath. She tried to imagine what Bastian might be thinking. He knew what she was now, and he wasn't here with her. What if he found what she'd done repulsive? How could he not?

With a brief, unusually painful energy scan, she determined enough to know that the ship was intact, for the most part. They must have been successful in their escape. That, at least, was good news. It was some comfort to know she'd helped. That everyone was safe...for the moment.

Now she began to worry for herself. Would Bastian see her as a prize, an asset to keep and use as he pleased? A ship's biggest expense was fuel. Would he think to use her as Darius had? A tool to be exploited?

"Anya?" Doctor Oshwald's voice rang out in the quiet little room. "Are you awake, child?"

Her eyelids fluttered in answer, but she couldn't keep them open.

"You heal almost as quickly as they do. It's amazing. What are you?"

"Who?" she managed. Her voice didn't sound like her own. It was too deep and scratchy. The use of her throat brought renewed pain. She wouldn't attempt to speak again, for a while at least.

"The demons," he replied. "They are one of the fastest healing races. They rarely need my services. Seems you are too, but you really did a number on yourself. Your insides were nearly mush. I've never seen anything like it." She felt a cool hand on her forehead. The relief was exquisite. "Ah, you're healing very well indeed. I'm going to use my ability to help it along. Let me know if you feel uncomfortable."

A very welcome chill rolled over her, driving out the incessant heat. She hadn't realized how hot she'd been feeling. But too soon the doctor removed his hand and the heat returned.

“That's all I can manage for now. You've taken most of my strength as it is.” She could tell he'd moved to his chair. “Rest now. I'll try again in a little while.”

It didn't take long for exhaustion to claim her.

CHAPTER 18



“*W*hat do you mean she woke? And you didn't call me!” Sebastian was fuming.

Dr. Oshwald was surprisingly calm in the face of an enraged demon. He sat at his desk, scribbling notes. He didn't even look up as Sebastian bellowed.

Nonchalantly, Oshwald said, “It was only for a few minutes. She'll wake again. Soon, I expect.”

Anya was lying motionless on the bed. Her color looked better, and she seemed to be breathing easier. She was still the most beautiful thing he'd ever laid eyes on. “You will call me when that happens.” It was an order not a request.

The doctor nodded, but kept his attention on his paper.

It had been more than twenty hours since she'd fallen unconscious. Sebastian hadn't slept a wink. He was too worried for his Anya. Admittedly, the lack of sleep might be making him more irritable than usual. Every minute, he was teetering on the Edge.

The ship had warped for a mere twenty-three seconds, and Anya paid a hefty price for it. *Something she will not be doing again.*

She'd succeeded in her goal, however. They were safely away from *Extarga*. After Aidan pinpointed their location, they found that they were only a few short days from their destination. What would have taken them more than four months had been reduced to seconds. The amount of power the ship must have consumed was incomprehensible.

He placed a hand on her cheek, rubbing lightly with his thumb. Her blond hair curled around her face in disarray, with her wee pointed ears sticking out from the mess. He willed her to show him once more the vivid blue of her eyes. After a moment of watching her sleep, he got up to leave, giving the doctor a meaningful glare before he went.

All over the ship, repairs were being made. The damage was surprisingly minimal. The shields held up well and were the first thing to be repaired. Just in case. Surprisingly, the wards had acted as a kind of second shield.

The thrusters had taken some damage, but nothing that would cripple the ship. They were back on course, and traveling at adequate speed.

As soon as Sebastian entered the control room, he was bombarded with questions about Anya's wellbeing. All the crew who were present and knew what had happened were grateful to her. Most had already visited her more than once.

Sebastian had given a hush order—no one was to speak of the events that had transpired. The less who knew of Anya's power, the better. He knew now that anyone with a questionable character might view her with greedy eyes. Think to use her for their own gain. And he also understood why Darius wanted her so badly.

Eager for news, Aidan asked, “Is she awake yet?”

Solemnly, Sebastian shook his head. Aidan's shoulders slumped. “The doctor is confident it will be soon,” he encouraged. Changing the subject, he said, “Let's establish contact with Ethanule.” He figured they should be close enough now to communicate with the pirate.

After a moment, Ethanule was on the screen. He smiled wide when he saw Sebastian. “Good Captain, how goes it?” He spoke like an aristocrat, not like the pirate he was known to be.

Sebastian replied, “All is well. We are a few days out now.”

“What quick service. I wasn't expecting you for months. You must have a very fast ship, indeed.”

Ethanule's hair was straight, cut to his shoulders, and so blond it was almost white, three braids hung heavily decorated with gold and red beads. He seemed young, but that could be deceiving. Ethanule could be as old as Sebastian. From his infamous reputation, he probably was.

His clothes looked expensive for a pirate, tailored even. He obviously took pride in his dress. A deep red coat adorned with gold trim and buttons accentuated the shape of his torso. The long sleeves and inner pockets most likely concealed more than one weapon. Under that was a black shirt. The fabric was surely top of the line. Gold rings decorated his fingers, two on one hand and one on the other. No doubt there was gold around his neck as well. Pirates adored gold in every form. Only his upper half was shown on the large screen, but Sebastian was sure his lower half was just as decorated.

Though his outward appearance was that of a spoiled young man of wealth, he held himself like any pirate would. A strong jaw, back straight, cocky grin, deadly aura.

“*Marada* holds up well under pressure.”

“Is my parcel safe?” he said, getting right to the point.

“As I said, all is well.”

Ethanule narrowed his eyes. “There are rumors of an attack. Are you certain nothing of mine was damaged?”

How could he know that?

Ethanule answered the question not yet spoken. “My influence is extensive. I have spies everywhere.”

“The damage was nothing. We escaped with only scratches.” He wished he could say the same for Anya.

“What luck,” he drawled. “I’ll have my men send you the exact coordinates. I look forward to concluding our business together.”

Sebastian could not agree more. “As do I.”

Ethanule’s men were rumored to be of the Denaloid race. A race of beings made up entirely of males. No females were ever born. The men perform the roles of mother and father. Conception happened the same as any male female relationship, only it was between two males. Sebastian didn’t even want to think about how that worked.

Just then, his console beeped. It was a direct call from sickbay. With a push of a button, he answered it. “Doctor?”

“She’s awake.”

The crew heard, and the room erupted in cheers. He let out a breath of relief. “I’ll be right there.”

Anya’s heart pounded in her chest. When she’d woken this time, the doctor hadn’t said a word. He only went to the intercom on his desk and said to someone on the other end, “She’s awake.” She both hoped and dreaded that he’d called Sebastian.

Soon enough, Sebastian’s massive body came strolling through the door. He’d changed clothes since she’d last seen him. How long had she been out? His familiar deep gold eyes swam with emotion, but she couldn’t read him. She was too weak and...afraid to know the truth.

He stared at her, motionless. And she stared back. When his jaw clenched tight, she knew he must no longer care for her. It reminded her of the first time they'd meet, with her, lying in this very spot, him, cold and distant. She turned away, shame consuming. She had been right. She was too abnormal—

“You are never to put yourself through that again!” For the first time since she'd met him, his voice was unsteady, latent with emotion. It made her look at him again.

She saw it now, the fear and concern in his eyes.

“Do you really mean that?” Her throat was still sore and it hurt to speak, but she had to be sure.

In two strides he was by her side, his hands caged around her face. He placed a gentle kiss on her lips. “This is not a request. It's an order. You are never to do anything like that again. Promise me.”

Her face froze in shock. She couldn't believe what he was saying. He didn't want her to use her gift? How could he be so wonderful? Perhaps she was misunderstanding...or, more likely, dreaming. “You realize I supplied your ship with power?”

He nodded.

“And you *don't* want me to do it again?”

“Are you kidding me? You nearly died. No, I don't want you to do it again. Ever!”

Every muscle in her seemed to relax. Then she let out a small sound of amusement. Her amusement grew into a chuckle. Despite all the pain she was feeling at the moment, she couldn't keep herself from outright laughing. “Gods,” she said. “Who is this dream you've given me?”

He kissed her again and this time she kissed him back. “No dream, love, flesh and bone, and all yours.” He took her wrist and placed a kiss where her already healed wound had been. “I've never been more afraid of anything in my life, than I was of losing you. Never again, okay?”

Her smile faded slightly. Sighing, she replied, “Bastian, you have no idea how happy it makes me to hear you say that.” She shrugged sheepishly. “I feared your reaction would be different.” She gathered a breath. “But if placed in a similar situation, where the choice is death or save my fam...friends, I will always make the same choice.” When he opened his mouth to protest, she quickly repeated, “Always. I will never promise otherwise.”

For a moment he said nothing. A muscle ticked in his jaw. “Then promise me this. You will not do it if there are any other options, or if I can think of any other options, or if anyone else can think of any other options, or if there is time to think of any other options...” He stopped to think. “And never to that extreme. Four, five seconds, max, never more than ten and you'll stop immediately if you start to feel pain...”

“Enough.” She laughed. “You'll make it impossible to justify using my gift at all.” Which, honestly, didn't sound so bad to her.

“That's the point.”

She rested her head back against her pillow. She was losing strength again.

Sebastian must have noticed. “Do you need to rest? I could—”

“No, don't go,” she interrupted.

“I won't. I will just sit here until you fall asleep.”

“What I'd really like is a real bed. I'm strong enough now that I shouldn't need the doctor, plus I've exhausted him as it is.”

“I will take you to your room then,” Sebastian offered.

“Can I...I mean, would you mind if I slept in your bed?”

“Not at all. It'll give me easier access.” Bastian lifted her in his arms. She could feel his muscles contracting. He held so gently, as though he was afraid he would break her.

Soon she was under his covers, gazing out at the clear view of space. No ship in sight. Sebastian changed into a loose pair of pants and slipped

in beside her. Warm in his protective arms she nuzzled his chest and inhaled his masculine scent.

“Why didn't you tell me?” He squeezed her gently.

“I was afraid you would look at me differently. Treat me different.”

“You thought I'd want to use you?”

She nodded.

“I would never want to hurt you like that.”

“What if it didn't hurt me? Would you...”

“I would still want it to be your choice. But it does hurt you,” he grated. “What of before? With Darius? Did you nearly die each time he used you?”

“I remember in the beginning it was...bad. I was only a child when he started the experiments.

“Experiments?”

“To see how much I could take.” Sebastian squeezed her again. “Eventually, I began to adapt. The pain lessened.” She turned her head to look up at Bastian. “I think that's why it was so bad this time. I'm unused to this ship. If I'd had more experience, started slower...”

“Not going to happen.”

“Just a theory. Anyway, I still couldn't be hooked up for more than a few seconds at a time, and Darius wanted more. So he built a contraption that siphoned out my energy slowly. It hurt less, but it lasted longer. A lot longer. Sometimes I would go unconscious. I never knew for how long.”

“I'm going to kill him,” he rasped.

“I can't talk you out of it. Can I?”

“Nope.”

“What about me? Where will I be while you're off searching for a way to get on his ship, past his sensors, and through his guards? He never leaves it, you know. Do you think he'll ever let you near him again?”

Ignoring her rant, he said, "I plan to leave you hidden in a safe place. Sonya and Marik will stay with you. Calic has decided to join me."

"Oh, no, please. Not the both of you."

"Let's not talk of this now. You need to rest, and I don't want to upset you."

Nodding, she laid her head on the pillow, but this wasn't over. Not by a long shot. She would just have to convince him to go into hiding with her.

Somehow.

CHAPTER 19



A nya sat in the Sanctuary, soaking up the quiet nature. An artificial cool breeze tickled her skin. She knew it wasn't the real thing, but after so long without it, it was a godsend.

Being here made her feel normal again. The last few days had been... different. She was changing. Her gift was becoming clearer and more sensitive. She knew, one floor down, there were two maintenance workers making repairs. And not too far away, a couple was making love. Their energy was like a dance. She knew Bastian was in the hallway right now, just about to enter the Sanctuary.

Two seconds later, he was loping toward her in all his sexy masculinity. His face lit up when he spotted her, the lips that played her body like a finely tuned instrument morphing into a lopsided grin. The intensity of his golden eyes always took her breath.

His energy told her he was delighted to find her, and a little aroused at seeing her—which made *her* a little aroused—but he worried for her at the same time.

“Here you are,” he said, sitting down beside her. “Why are you here alone?”

“It's peaceful. Quiet.”

“It's not peaceful in my room? Don't get me wrong, I'm glad you're feeling well enough to get back into your routine, but you cannot believe the disappointment I felt when I didn't find a beautiful half-naked woman in my bed.”

Anya couldn't help her smile. “I wanted to do some training.” And get away from the energy-chaos of the control room just below. It had begun to overwhelm her. So, even though she wasn't feeling one hundred percent, she decided it was as good a time as any to get out of there. She thought a little workout would make her feel better, but training with Cale today had been something new entirely.

“I spoke with Cale.” Sebastian's voice hardened. “He's lucky I let him go without a serious limp after what he did.”

“He was only trying to help,” she replied. It had been more of a reckless experiment.

After finding Cale in the training room, his first comment had been, “About time.” Then they'd begun a new kind of training. Anya was hesitant at first, but Cale could talk a lead weight into flying.

Grabbing a light bulb straight from a socket, Cale held it between two fingers in front of him and told her to *turn it on*. She'd snorted, but he only raised an eyebrow and waited. She assured him that she wouldn't be able to unless she was touching it, but he persisted. Placating him, Anya concentrated on the light bulb, feeling very silly in doing so.

Cale was extraordinarily patient, standing motionless for an hour while nothing happened. Just before she was about to give up, she tried one last time and everything around her went quiet. There was a buzzing deep inside her. On instinct, she grasped hold of it, clasping it in her mind. Slowly, her body became electrified, her skin hummed with energy.

Then she became acutely aware of her surroundings. Inside the walls, wires passed energy back and forth. She could feel the movement, like a controlled wind.

The light bulb in Cale's hand came into focus. It too began to hum. The gathering energy that bloomed inside her was like a tight ball of pulsing current. Instinctively she threw it at the bulb.

It flickered.

They both sucked in a breath.

Then it began to glow, brighter and brighter, illuminating Cale's shocked features. Then....

Boom!

It exploded like a tiny bomb. Cale dropped what was left of the casing and covered his face with his hand.

"Cale! Are you okay?" He looked at her and she gasped. Glass shards penetrated his skin. One eye was closed, bleeding, and beginning to swell. "Oh, gods! Cale I'm so sorry. I...are you smiling?"

"That was the shit!" he bellowed.

"But your eye..."

"In an hour, it'll heal. Next time I won't be looking straight at the bulb."

"Next time!"

"Yeah, you're going to do that again." He scrambled for another light bulb. "Try not to blow it up this time."

They'd gone through seven light bulbs, all exploded.

Now, beside her, Bastian seethed. "Know that I'm not happy about this. I thought we had an agreement. No more using your gift."

"We agreed that I wouldn't use it on the ship, unless absolutely necessary," she quickly added, then looked away to hide her worried expression.

"What is it? Are you feeling alright?"

"No, I'm fine. It's just...I feel like I'm changing. Rather, my gift is changing, or growing, or something. I need to get a handle on it or I'm

afraid it will consume me. Training with Cale this morning felt...right. If I can learn to harness it, then maybe next time I won't almost die."

"There isn't going to be a next time."

"There might be. And even if there isn't, I still feel like I should explore my gift, instead of burying it."

Bastian gave her a weary look, but nodded, seeing that this was important to her. "I want you to be careful, go slow."

"I will, on one condition." He raised an eyebrow. "You give up on Darius."

"No deal."

"Then I want to go with you." Secretly, she thought if she could evolve her gift, she could help in taking Darius out. But she knew there was no way Sebastian would willingly let her anywhere near him again. In the back of her mind she knew she was grasping at straws, but what else could she do? She didn't feel right about letting Sebastian risk his life—and Cale's too—for *her* revenge.

"Again, no deal."

Anya's shoulders slumped. "I'll be so worried if you go."

"I know, but he is a threat to you. It's the only way I know to keep you safe. Tell you what, I'll let you choose the place where you, Marik, and Sonya will stay until Cale and I get back."

Hmm...an opportunity?

She could reject every place they offered. She would keep Bastian so busy looking for the perfect hideout he would never be able to go after Darius.

"And no turning down every location just to keep me with you." His lips twitched.

Damn.

She pursed her lips in displeasure.

Bastian chuckled.

“What do you mean you told her she could go!” Sebastian bellowed. *Is everyone working against me?*

In the bridge, Cale was seated at his station waiting for the ship to dock. Sonya had just entered, with Anya trailing behind, to give him this nasty bit of news.

Blithely, Sonya replied, “It's not a big deal.”

“The hell it isn't! These are pirates we're talking about.”

“You don't seem to mind that *I'm* going,” Sonya countered.

“Sunny, you can take care of yourself, for the most part.”

“What do you mean *for the most part?*”

Anya interjected, “I want to go. I'm getting all stark crazy.”

“It's stir crazy,” Sebastian grumbled, seeing through her.

They were but minutes from reaching the coordinates Ethanule had given them. The expedition party was to be himself, Cale, Sonya, Aidan, and a few other crew members. He thought, with three demons, any problems would be quickly subdued, but that was before the addition of Anya.

“I don't feel right about this.” Sebastian's instincts were raging at him. *Keep her safe!*

“Please, I really do want to go. Besides, I'll have three surly demons to protect me,” she said, echoing his thoughts. “I promise to stay out of the way.” Her big blue eyes beseeched. As if he could say no to something she desired.

Grudgingly, he said, "Fine, but stay near me at all times, and keep quiet." Her smile was radiant, making him greedy for her. Once this was finished, he'd set to claiming his mate once and for all.

Cale rolled his eyes. "Ah, enough with the sweetness, it leaves a bad taste in my mouth." To Aidan, he said, "Hey, mate, where is this place? Thought we'd be there by now."

"I've checked the coordinates three times. We should be right on top of it. I've been scanning the area, there's nothing here."

The room went quiet.

"Trap?" Cale suggested.

Just then Aidan's computer chirped, indicating an incoming transmission.

Ethanule appeared on screen, seated in a chair that bordered on a throne. His dress was that of before, aristocratically precise, with his deep-green coat and gold buckles that decorated each pocket.

Sebastian noticed a tilt of Anya's head as she appraised Ethanule.

Gritting his teeth, Sebastian said, "Is this some kind of trick? We've followed your directions. Why are you not here?"

"Well, we've moved of course."

Sonya chimed in. "Obviously."

Ethanule's gaze trailed down the length of Sonya's body and slowly back up. Cale stood to his full height, and Sebastian moved to block his view of both Sonya and Anya.

Anya merely peeked around his massive body, while Sonya pushed him aside and brazenly crossed her arms in a challenging gesture. Her tail flicked.

"Nice tail," Ethanule said.

"What's your game, pirate?" Cale snapped.

Phlegmatic, he replied, "There's no game. The move was unavoidable. You'll see when you get here. I'm sending you a secure signal. Trace it. I'll

expect you soon.”

The screen went black.

Sonya humphed. “What a pompous ass!”

“Well, that pompous ass is going to get us our pay and get these wards down so we can get the fuck off this ship already,” Cale snapped.

Aidan called from his console, “Captain, I have a trace on the signal. I'd say we can be there in two hours.”

“Good, let's finish this. Approach cautiously. Keep your eyes open for anything.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Anya mouth to Sonya, “He looked nice.”

“Sweetie,” she replied. “Your record with men is one-in-zero.” She glanced at Sebastian. “And your taste is questionable. Trust me, that pirate has one hell of an ego on him.”

Sebastian made a gesture to Sonya. One that Anya had come to know as flipping the bird. Sonya returned the gesture with a playful grin.

Cale added to Sonya, “His ego couldn't possibly be bigger than yours.”

“Bite me, Cale,” Sonya replied.

“Not if you were the last female left in the universe.”

Anya could only smile at the way the siblings interacted. It was rough, but at the same time cute, in a way. They obviously cared for each other, but ripped on each other relentlessly. She loved it.

Ethanule, to say the least, was intriguing. She couldn't get a read on him—since he wasn't actually in the room—but...there was something

odd about him.

In her ear, Sebastian whispered. “Is it necessary that you go? We'll have plenty of time for sightseeing later. I can show you worlds the likes of which you could not imagine. A pirate's lair would be anything but interesting in comparison.”

“How could you say what would be interesting to me and what wouldn't? I think a pirate's lair should be very interesting.” And, she added to herself, if Sebastian was going, then so would she. She intended to prove that he didn't need to leave her behind for any reason.

The group watched through the large window as they came upon thick clusters of space debris. Small at first, but as *Marada* progressed, the dust and debris grew into small rocks, and then boulders, and larger still. Aidan had to maneuver the ship around them.

“I think we're here,” Aidan finally said.

All she could see was a huge asteroid. And they were heading right for it.

The ship began to slow. Sebastian and the others watched quietly. Then she noticed a notch in the rock that looked deliberate. The lines were too straight to be natural.

“His base is inside an asteroid?” Sonya said incredulously.

Aidan eased the ship into the docking station. As they crossed the threshold, Anya felt a powerful release of energy. Sebastian noticed her slight intake of breath and gave her a questioning look.

“I think I just felt the wards dissipate.”

Behind them, a thick metal wall dropped down, closing with a heavy sound. Loud whooshing indicated that the docking bay was being securely sealed and pressurized.

“Alright.” Sebastian had transitioned into captain mode. “Let's go. Anya stays behind me. The rest follow behind her.” Sonya exited the ship

at Anya's side. Aidan and Cale took up the rear. Cale carried the package they'd come all this way to deliver.

Two strong looking males greeted them. They both had light colored hair and deeply tanned skin. Saying nothing, the guards bowed politely, turned, and gestured that the group was to follow.

At an unhurried pace, they walked through bare halls carved from the rock, dirt, and ice that made up the core of the asteroid. Lights were hung garishly along one side of the cave like structures, illuminating their way. A fine dust and bits of rock covered the floor.

And the smell was amazing. It was thick and dingy and didn't smell particularly great, but it was raw. Anya inhaled deeply, remembering the scent of real dirt.

The two silent guards led them through a maze of dark, identical caves until they reached a brightly lit, open area. The ceiling was carved twice as high and curved near the top.

More guards lined the outer edge of the room. Ethanule sat, kingly, against the far wall. Studiously, he raked his gaze over the group, lingering briefly on Anya, then Sonya, then finally the package in Cale's arms. His eyes twinkled.

"Thank you," he started. "Your services are much appreciated. You have no idea how important these are to me."

Anya figured the *these* he referred to was whatever resided in the box, and dismissed his phrasing. She was more interested in the odd energy she was reading from him.

Sebastian replied, "You're welcome. I trust the wards were taken care of when we entered?"

"Of course, of course. There is nothing to worry about."

With a tilt to his lips, Ethanule focused on Anya again. She couldn't put her finger on it, but there was something strange in his essence.

Bastian took a step closer. "I assume that our pay is ready as well?"

Ethanule smiled.

Until now, she had been ignoring the energy imprints of the guards, because they'd been nothing but benign, but the sudden shift crashed into her. “Bastian, the guards!”

It was too late. When she turned to him, a long dart had already penetrated his neck. He bellowed before crumbling to his feet. The others were taken down just as quickly.

She felt a prick in her arm. A dart was there. She had time to pull it out before everything went black.

CHAPTER 20



A steady cloud of haze blanketed Anya's mind. Her body was heavy and sluggish to respond. Clumsily, she pushed a lock of hair out of her face and rubbed her tired eyes.

Cool air swept over her cheeks, but the rest of her body was quite warm.

Recalling the point of a dart sticking out of her flesh, she squinted her eyes open. Dark red-brown blocks of a wall faced her. Rising up on her elbows, she surveyed the rest of her surroundings.

She was in a small cell, alone.

Where were Sebastian and the others?

The same dark blocks that made up the walls also lined the floor. She could tell they were thick, maybe by a foot. The only way out, a single heavy door with a small barred window placed just high enough that she would need to jump to see out of it.

Compared with the overall look of the cell, the accommodations were surprising. Instead of waking up shivering on a cold floor, she was on a soft mattress and pillow with a plush blanket wrapped around her. There was a tray of food sitting just beside the bulky door. On closer inspection, she expected it to be old or spoiled, but it wasn't. It looked...fresh.

Odd.

Not knowing what else to do, she pushed the blanket off her and moved to the door. To her great disappointment, the lock was the kind that required a metal key. She pushed on the door, suspecting it wouldn't budge, but still she had to try.

Sensing Sebastian was near, she whispered, "Sebastian?"

"Any!" His voice rang out, followed by a loud clang as if he'd slammed into metal. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Where is everyone?"

Sonya answered. "We're all here." Their voices were close.

"You're all where?"

"We're all together in this cell. Sounds like we're just next to you."

"Why am I not with you?"

"We don't know."

Sebastian snarled, "Have they hurt you? Why have you not made yourself known until now?"

"I just woke up. How long have you been awake?"

"A couple of days," He sounded exhausted.

"Days? Have I been sleeping that long?"

Sonya's voiced, "Aidan only woke up a few hours ago. Some of the others are still out. Sebastian, Cale, and I were the first to wake. Let me tell you what a blast that has been," she added sarcastically. "Whatever they shot us with was potent enough to take down a demon so it's having a stronger effect on everyone else."

"What about *Marada*? What of the people on board?"

"We don't know."

Three loud bangs echoed outside her door, followed by a snarling Sebastian.

"What was that?" Anya asked.

Blasé, Sonya replied, “Sebastian and Cale have been taking turns getting intimately acquainted with a five inch thick metal door.”

She heard Cale say, “Anya, can you...you know...with your lock?”

Sebastian interrupted. “No, we'll find another way.”

Confused, Anya replied, “What do you mean? The locks need a key.” Her statement was followed by a brief silence.

“Your lock isn't electronic?”

“No.”

“Fuck,” Cale said bleakly.

“What's the matter?” she asked.

“Ours is.”

Anya digested this information. The cell with all the demons and crew members was secured by an electronic lock, and hers was not. Could the pirates know of her ability? Had they taken this precaution because they suspected she might breach a mechanized lock?

“Dammit,” Sebastian bit out. “Anya, I'll get you out of there.”

“Actually,” a new voice corrected. “I'll get her out of there.”

A string of curses flew from all three demons.

“Energetic bunch you all are,” Ethanule said, ignoring their graphic threats.

Anya backed away from the door when she heard the sound of a key being inserted.

Click.

Ethanule was taller than she thought he would be, as tall as Sebastian. His frame just as big. He was covered by a long dark coat over a deep-red sweater, black pants and heavy boots. The only trinkets he wore were the thick gold bands on his fingers.

Ethanule smiled at her appraisal of him and bowed. “You like?”

With disdain, she replied, “Why have you locked us up?”

Tilting his head in confusion, he said, “To keep you from leaving, of course.”

Obviously. “Why would you want to do that?”

He shrugged. “To answer that, I’ll need you to come with me.”

Sebastian howled, “Let me out of here, you traitorous vermin. I will rip your head from your body.”

To Anya, Ethanule said, “Well, now I will definitely not be letting him out.” He turned abruptly. “Follow me. My chambers will provide some much-needed privacy.”

Anya took a step out of her cell. Two guards lined the wall facing the cell doors. Ethanule kept walking as if he expected her to just follow.

She did.

“If you harm her in any way, you will regret it!” Sebastian grated.

From behind her, she heard Cale add, “That’s not a threat, mate, that’s a fact.”

When they reached one of the dim hallways Ethanule commented to himself, “Fascinating. Loyalty in demons is difficult to inspire.” He gave her an admiring glance and walked on. “I apologize about the tranquilizer. I hadn’t wanted you to sleep quite so long, and that particular dart was not meant for you, but...no harm done.”

“Thank you for your concern,” Anya said, mimicking Sonya’s sarcastic tone. “Why don’t you get to the point?”

“Just as impatient as your demons, aren’t you?” Ethanule stopped and opened a large door, gesturing for her to enter. When she didn’t, he said, “Come on, I will not harm you.”

“You’ll understand if I don’t believe you.”

“Pirates honor.”

Anya entered the room, not because she trusted him, but because she knew he wasn’t really giving her a choice. The two guards had trailed close behind.

His chamber was magnificent in its splendor. Red, orange, and green linen draped the entire room, floor to ceiling. The ground was not dirt and dust, but a spread of lush burgundy carpet. Lanterns lined the walls and hung from the ceiling, giving off a warm glow throughout the room.

There were three large chairs arranged around a small table. A large desk sat against the wall opposite the door. A heavy book lay atop it, the cover and spine shimmering with gold.

Next to the desk, now open and empty, was the package Cale had been carrying—the package that Sebastian was supposed to have been paid for.

Her rage flared.

She heard a soft click and turned to see that Ethanule had closed the door behind him, watching her intently. No guards had followed. Anya took an involuntary step back into her fighting stance. He only smiled, enraging her further.

“Brave little one.” He stepped forward, and she lunged. She realized her mistake immediately, but it was too late. He grabbed her wrist and twisted her around so that he was at her back and had managed to lock both her hands in place behind her. Cale had demonstrated a similar move many times, and she chastised herself for not seeing it coming.

Hadn't even got in a hit.

Ethanule secured both her hands in one of his, and raised his other hand to her face. She flinched, expecting him to strike her, but he only moved her hair aside, revealing one pointed ear. Her heart began to thunder.

“What?” She feigned nonchalance as she struggled against his hold. “Never seen pointed ears before?”

“I've seen ears like yours more often than you might think.”

She stilled. “You have?” Interest rapidly replaced fear.

Could he know of my people?

“Yes. I'll tell you about it if you like, though I much prefer conversations face to face. If I let you go, will you promise not to attack me again?”

She nodded, not sure if she really meant it. As soon as he released her, she darted away from him.

As if trying to project a non-threatening persona, Ethanule took a seat in one of the nearby chairs. Leaning back, he crossed his arms over his chest, looking very relaxed. But the fact that he'd just subdued her without any effort kept her on guard.

She moved to put one of the other large chairs between them. Not that it would stop him if he wanted to get to her, but it would give her time to react if needed.

“Please have a seat. I've already given my word that I will not hurt you.”

“My friends are locked up against their will. Some of them are still unconscious from the drug you shot into them. The word of a pirate does not hold much weight with me at the moment.”

“Touché,” is all he said, and resumed watching her.

For the moment, his energy was benign. There was also something more. A familiarity. Almost as if...“Tell me, where have you seen ears like mine?”

“Before we get to that, would you like a drink? Something to eat?”

Raising her chin, she waited for an answer.

“You must be hungry after two days of restful sleep.”

Again, she only stared.

“Suit yourself.” Ethanule stood, and she jumped back. He gave her a chafed look as he moved past her to stand behind the desk. Placing his hand on the large book he said, “This will tell you everything you need to know. All you have to do, Analia, is open it.”

She stood motionless for a moment. He'd used her given name.

Reading her expression, he added, “Yes, I know who you are. I know more about you than perhaps you do.”

“Like what?”

“You don't remember your people, your home planet, what happened there?”

She looked at the book and then at the empty package on the floor. “Is that book what we came to deliver?”

He nodded.

“And it holds the answers that I seek?”

“Yes.”

The book was as thick as her fist by two. The cover was dark red leather framed by a decorative gold border that weaved over the front and back. It radiated an energy, similar to the wards she'd felt on *Marada*.

“But you seek these answers as well?” Anya surmised.

“I do.”

“Why, then, do you need me? Why not just open the book and see for yourself.”

He gave her a knowing smile. “It's been enchanted to open for only three people in the universe.”

Three? “And somehow I'm one of the three? Where are the others?”
Were they like her?

“That's what I hope to find out.”

To exploit them?

If what he claimed was true, then this book would hold the answers to her lost people. And if she opened it here and now, then this pirate will have the information as well. What if this knowledge was locked away for a reason? What if her people were in hiding because of people like Darius and this pirate?

She moved in close. “How do I open it?”

“You must only touch the lock.”

Placing her hands on the book, she ran them over the cover. The aura she felt was comforting.

“Tell me,” he said from behind her. “What do you know of a man named Darius?”

Anya grabbed the heavy book with both hands and heaved it off the desk. Her aim was perfect, though the book was much heavier than she'd first imagined. With a loud crack to his skull, Ethanule crumbled to the floor. In a delayed reaction, her heart began to pound in her chest.

Clutching the thick book in one arm, she turned to the door. The doorknob squeaked lightly as she turned it, and the hall seemed darker after being in the brightly colored room. No guards were in sight. Perhaps they figured Ethanule could handle one small girl. Inwardly, she chuckled.

Easing the door closed behind her, she transferred the weight of the book to her other arm and began retracing her steps. Distant echoes reverberated through the hall. Desperately glancing around, Anya couldn't see very far. Her senses were more astute than her vision at the moment. She could feel that people were near, but not in the same hallway as her.

With the sounds of her feet crunching against gravel, she kept moving. Reassuring herself that she was going the right way, she reached out to scan for Sebastian and the others. She caught a glimpse of their energy and continued on through a second tunnel. Sebastian's angry roars confirmed that she was on the right track.

He quieted as she reached the edge of the chamber, as though he sensed her as well. No doubt he did.

Two guards were still against a wall, facing the center of the room. She wouldn't be able to overtake them both. She would have to move quickly before they could catch her. Knowing that she would need both hands to disable the lock, she laid the book against the wall of the corridor.

The control for the lock was just left of the door. It looked like the kind that required a keycard. She should have searched Ethanule before she'd

left him. Too late now. She would have to, as Cale would say, pull a light bulb on it.

But for this to work, she would need to be close to the lock. Very close. Touching would be ideal, but she doubted that would be possible.

She found that every object emitted its own energy signature, and she was unfamiliar with the signatures here, which suggested an unpredictable outcome. With the light bulbs, she'd been able to take her time, get a feel for each one. If she wasn't careful, she could wind up blowing up her friends.

Shaking herself, she focused on her task. Get past the guards, disable the lock.

Sucking in her chest, she shot forward into the chamber, the guards saw her immediately and yelled their surprise. They didn't waste time in coming after her, but she was ahead of them by a few feet; it was all she needed.

Reaching out for the lock, she focused her energy on it, trying to get inside it with everything she had.

A large arm wrapped around her torso, pinning her arms to her side.

"No!" She'd almost been there.

"Any!" Sebastian roared.

As the guard ripped her body back, she screamed, "Bastian!" She struggled relentlessly, but the guard's grip was painfully tight, so much so that she could hardly breathe. Sebastian roared again, this time his timbre was more ferocious. The sound of flesh ramming into metal rang out from behind the door. He was trying to break it down. She didn't want him to hurt himself, but she was in pain, so when she cried his name again—meaning to calm him—it was like throwing fuel on a flame.

The guard, she sensed, was confused by the turn of events and unsure what to do. The door to Sebastian's cell was visibly bowing with each merciless ram. The guard was riveted, his heart hammering against her

back. Dust and rocks began to crumble from the walls at the onslaught, and the guard tightened his grip once more, making her gasp and thrash.

She needed to get the door open before Sebastian really did harm himself. His energy had spiked to a killing rage and would not be eased unless... “Take your hands off me!” she warned the guard.

“Shut up!” he replied, pulling out a gun from a holster at his back aiming it at the door.

“No! Bastian!” Again she sounded panicked and Sebastian misunderstood. His wild rage worsened. The bone crunching sound of him beating himself against the door was agonizing.

Fighting against the guard’s iron grip, Anya did the only thing she could think of in her panicked state: she began to focus on the lock once more.

Trying to single out its energy alone, while all of the intensity around her was heightened to a fever pitch, was proving nearly impossible. Every source of energy within two hundred feet bombarded her senses.

When Sebastian threw himself at the door once more, it was followed by a muffled groan of pain. The sound cut her deep in her chest, driving her into an uncontrollable urgency to stop this. With reckless abandon, she fixed her attention on every single energy source, allowing it all to flood into her at once. It washed over her like little sparks of light floating in and out of her every cell. Like sizzling bubbles invading her mind and massaging the very essence of her being.

It felt...good, as though something else inside her was taking over. A driving instinct that had been buried deep. She relinquished control to it and heat washed over her. A welcome heat.

“What the...” The guard released her and backed away, still clutching his weapon. The second guard backed up as well.

In her mind, the energy began to solidify, becoming like thick wires stringing directly into her. She gripped them and held them tight. The

power was massive, unlimited, and all hers.

The heat grew to a swelter. Becoming too much.

Anya hunched over and closed her eyes. She was forgetting why she'd started this. A terrible ringing flooded her ears, but Sebastian's roar pulled her back from surrendering completely to the instinct that threatened to overpower her.

But the snaking wires had buried themselves deep, intertwined with her essence, and she had to mentally rip them away. The act brought pain. With each wire she managed to remove, she vaguely comprehended a corresponding popping sound. In one swift pull, she pried them all out at once.

The dim lights in the room surged before erupting in loud bursts, veiling the room in darkness. Distant pops sounded down the hallway as the chain of lights exploded, one after the other.

There was a soft click, and the door to the cell was unlocked. And then nearly torn off the hinges by Sebastian. The demons poured out, ready for a fight, but the guards had fled. Aidan and the other crew members, still groggy, stumbled from the cell.

Sebastian scooped her up, squeezing her to his chest just as hard as the guard had, but instead of pain, she only felt a deep satisfaction at being in his arms again.

"Let's get to the ship," Cale said from out of the darkness.

"Agreed." Sebastian, still holding her, began to move.

"Wait. The book!" Anya nearly forgot.

"What book?"

She pointed through the darkness to where she thought the book might be. Her vision had not yet adjusted to the pitch-black chamber, but she figured that Sebastian's had. Sure enough, Bastian followed her directions without the slightest care for his steps.

"I left a book on the ground here, just by the wall."

“Anya, there is no book.”

“There must be. It must be here.”

“There is nothing, love. We must go.”

Because she still couldn't see clearly, Sebastian continued carrying her as they made their way through the tangle of caves. The demons all seemed to be in silent concurrence about the path they followed. When she quietly questioned this Sebastian told her they could smell the ship.

Eventually they traveled far enough through the caves that some of the lights remained undamaged, and she had Sebastian set her down.

Just as they began to move once more, he froze, putting himself protectively in front of her. “The ship is just up ahead, but we're not alone.”

Anya once again felt the familiar energy. Ethanule and roughly ten guards with weapons appeared at their front.

Ethanule was holding the book.

“Analia,” Ethanule started. “We seem to have gotten off on the wrong foot. I apologize.”

She tilted her head, eyes darting between Ethanule and the book in his arms.

“There are things you need to know. Things about our people.”

“Our people?” Anya asked dimly.

“We are the same, you and I.”

From behind her, Sonya huffed, “Ha! He's lying.”

Then he reached up and brushed his hair to the side, revealing a pointed ear just like hers. Anya sucked in a breath and mindlessly reached out, Sebastian gently pulled her back.

Could it be? After all this time?

The whole of her life she'd longed to find one of her own.

“I was about to tell you just before your pesky crack to my head. That hurt, by the way.” He gave a crooked smile as if he were secretly proud of

her.

Ignoring his chide, she asked, “Why did you lock us up? Why drug us?”

“I feared you were being held captive by these demons. There are many who develop an unnatural obsession with our kind. I meant only to protect you.”

“And the lock on my door?”

“If—which it seems to be the case—you were with these demons by choice, I did not want you able to flee before I could speak with you.”

“So you *do* know what I can do?”

“I have been told, yes.”

“By who?” she demanded.

Ethanule paused, debating his next words. “Your father.”

CHAPTER 21



*A*nya swayed on her feet. Sebastian placed a hand on her back to steady her. She leaned against him for support, eyes growing stark.

She whispered, “My father?”

Sebastian felt a slight tremble run through her.

Ethanule continued. “I can explain everything if you'll let me.”

Anya narrowed her eyes. “Why did you ask me about Darius?”

“What!” Sebastian bellowed. He exchanged glances with the others.

Ethanule noticed their unease. “He contacted me, asked me about a woman fitting Analia's description.” To Anya, he said, “I didn't like what I saw in his eyes when he spoke of you, so I told him I'd seen no such woman.”

“We must go. Now!” Sebastian motioned his crew forward despite the guards still blocking their way. “Tell me Ethanule, do you know how far away his ship was when he contacted you?”

“I do not.” Ethanule allowed them to push past and followed beside Sebastian. “Who is this Darius?”

Sonya answered, “You spoke of unnatural obsession? Well, he's the prime example.”

Still looking utterly shocked, Anya began firing off questions as they walked. “What of my father? Where is he? How did he know I'd come to be here? How is it he knew to tell you of me? Does he still live? Does he know where I've been?”

Ethanule edged, “As far as I know, he lives. As for the other stuff, we will have plenty of time to speak of it later. Seems the demon's in a hurry.”

Anya halted, looking almost wild. “Does he know where I've been?” she repeated louder.

With compassion in his voice and heavy sigh, Ethanule replied, “Analia, it's complicated.”

“Do *you* know?”

He paused. “I've been told very little. But what I was told...I'm... sorry.”

Sebastian saw the truth of it in his eyes. Ethanule somehow knew something of Anya's history, and the pirate's remorse seemed genuine. That alone saved his life.

“It's why I suspected the demons, but now I'm thinking...” He looked to Sebastian, “Darius?”

Sebastian gave a tight nod. He could only imagine what Anya must be feeling at this moment. She'd just discovered a link to her people, a link to her father. And it seemed both had knowledge of her suffering and had done nothing about it.

He knew there must be more to the story, had to be, but if Anya asked him to kill Ethanule for her right now, he would, with pleasure. Ethanule must have seen the darkness in Sebastian's eyes because he took a step back.

“There's much I must explain. It's not as simple as you think. If your father could have done something, I know—”

“Enough,” Anya interrupted. Sebastian could hear the pain in her voice. “I don't want to hear any more.” With a firm step, she pushed past

them.

They entered the docking station. The ship was intact, guards all around. Everyone must have been forced to remain on board for the duration of their not so hospitable stay. Good, that meant there were fewer people to round up, and the faster they could get going.

From behind him, Ethanule said, "I'm coming with you."

"Is that what you think?"

"Remember, I'm the one in control of all the guns."

Sebastian spared a glance to a nearby guard and kept moving. Bullets hurt, but rarely packed the power to incapacitate a demon, especially a demon as strong as he. Taking a bullet would only enrage him, which in turn would make him stronger.

Ethanule continued, "It's important that I explain things to her. I must stay with her until I can. It's my duty, to my people, my king. After that, if she doesn't believe what I have to say, you can, I don't know, throw me into space or something."

That made Sebastian chuckle. "What is it with your kind and wanting to be thrown into space?"

"What?"

"Never mind. She was looking for a book earlier. Is that the book you carry?"

"Yes, but only I can translate it. She'll need me for that."

A muscle ticked in Sebastian's jaw. The thought of Anya needing this male, one of her own kind, for anything, irked him. It brought out a possessive urge. But if Anya could finally learn about her heritage—something he sensed she was desperate for—then Sebastian would go against his instincts and allow it. Only if that was what Anya wanted, that is.

"It's Anya's decision," Sebastian finally said. "I'll abide by her choice." A deep sense of foreboding washed over him. Sebastian was sure there

would be a lot to Ethanule's story. And he was also sure he wasn't going to like any of it.

Sebastian watched as Ethanule crossed the room to speak with Anya. She'd gone to the ship and was waiting impatiently to board. Sebastian signaled everyone to give them space, even though it pained him to do so. His intuition screamed for him to keep them separated.

"What do you think?" Cale and Sonya had gathered around.

"I don't like him," Sonya sneered. "I don't trust him. He's a damn pirate. Anya has wanted to find someone like her and then boom, here he is? It's too coincidental."

Cale added, "I would love to have seen Anya crack him over the head."

Sebastian would love to have seen it too. He continued to watch the emotions play over his Anya's face, fighting the urge to go to her. When her lower lip began to quiver, he lost the fight. He was to her in an instant. "What did he say to you?"

She reached for him, burrowing her face in his chest. Though it killed him to see her hurt, it was also deeply gratifying that she was in his arms, had reached to him for comfort. He laid a soft kiss on the top of her head.

Ethanule's eyes flashed with something inscrutable. "I told her that our people are at war, and they are depending on her."

"I can't think," Anya mumbled to his chest. "Ethanule wants to come with us." She looked up at him with a mixture of terror and hope. "What do you think?"

He wanted to instruct her to tell this pirate he could screw off. They could take the book and find someone else to translate it. Demons, for one, were very good at deciphering languages of all types. He wanted to tell her she didn't need Ethanule...for anything.

But seeing that glimmer of hope in her eyes, he said, "I think you should at least listen to what he has to say." He took her chin between his thumb and forefinger. "Then, if you want, I will kill him for you."

With a crooked smile, Ethanule scoffed, "You could try demon." But then he turned hopeful as Anya looked him over, preparing to make her choice.

"Alright," is all she said.

When they started ascending into the ship, Cale asked, "Is it true what these Denaloids do to prisoners? I've heard some nasty stuff." It was rumored that the Denaloids often sexually abused the criminals of their race, among other barbaric tortures such as castration.

Ethanule replied simply, "Just be glad you were under my protection."

Sebastian caught the gleam in Calic's eye and knew what he was about to suggest. When Cale mentioned his plan to Ethanule, Ethanule answered sarcastically, "My men would love a *pet* project."

A few minutes later, Xandar was being hauled out of the ship and presented to Ethanule's second in command.

Sebastian noted that Anya watched, detached and distant. She hated the idea of someone suffering, even if they deserved it. Her kind heart would probably feel sorry for him later, but now she was in too much shock from Ethanule's revelation to offer any kind of protest.

Sonya was all for it. With pleasure, and artful precision, she cracked Xandar in the face with a heavy right hook. Sebastian knew that right hook well. When sparring, he would do everything to avoid it.

As Xandar slumped in Cale's and Aidan's hold, Ethanule eyed Sonya with renewed interest, brows raised. Sebastian sometimes forgot how tiny Sonya actually was, and to anyone who didn't know her, it was shocking that such a small creature could pack such a mean punch. Sonya gave Ethanule an arrogant wink and flicked her tail before going to stand beside Anya.

The fact that Sebastian had been ferrying around a predator weighed heavily on his conscience. The number of victims under Xandar's belt was unknown, but in Sebastian's opinion, one was one too many. Now Xandar

begged for mercy, which was more than his victims had been allotted. The doors to the ship closed with a loud ominous sound, condemning Xandar to his fate.

Inside, quick little Sonya already had a dagger to Ethanule's throat, a hardness to her gaze. "What should we do with the pirate?"

Ethanule was looking at her with a strange expression. If Sebastian didn't know any better, he'd say Ethanule was amused by Sonya.

Anya replied first. "I think you should lock him up."

At that, Ethanule's jaw dropped. He looked more shocked at Anya's comment than the knife at his throat.

"Sounds good to me, how about you guys?"

Both Sebastian and Cale nodded. It was safer to lock him up. They all needed to concentrate on steering clear of *Extarga*, and a pirate running around the ship would be a distraction. In fact, it might be best if he remained in confinement indefinitely. Ethanule could do his translating just as well from a cell.

When Sonya began guiding him down the hall, Anya called out, "In sickbay, please." The same place she'd been kept. She knew it was more comfortable than the cells where Xandar had been incarcerated.

Cale rolled his eyes. Sonya looked to Sebastian for confirmation. He nodded, then turned back to see Anya trudging in the opposite direction, head down as though lost in thought. Most likely she was.

Catching up to her, Sebastian said, "I need to take command now and get us to a safe place. Are you going to be okay?" He wanted more than anything to stay with her, and for her to want him to.

"I'll be fine." Her tone said otherwise. "Do you mind if I go lie down in your bed for a while?"

He felt a twinge of satisfaction that she would prefer his bed above her own. "I wouldn't mind. In fact I'd like it if you would stay with me, in my room, from now on. Think of it as your own." He waited, growing a little

nervous when she said nothing. He mused that waiting for an answer from this tiny creature made him more anxious than anything that came before.

Finally, she said, "I'd like that too." Then she paused and, with an impish grin, said, "Your room has a better view."

Two days had passed, and Anya still hadn't visited Ethanule. She'd gone just about everywhere but sickbay, if that was truly where Sonya had taken him. She'd been avoiding him, and the whole subject of him, altogether.

Sonya asked her only one question. "So," she said. "What do you think?" Anya had only shrugged in response while continuing to take drink orders.

There seemed to be a mutual consensus among the crew who'd been present on the asteroid to leave Anya to digest all that had transpired. Marik asked her questions because he hadn't been there, but his questions were more along the line of her state of mind and how she was feeling. His concern gave her insight into what it might have been like to have a big brother.

Would a big brother have tried to rescue me when my father hadn't?

Cale only wanted to know about when she'd struck Ethanule with the book, and how quickly he went down. Cale could be single minded. If it wasn't women on his mind, it was violence.

Sebastian hadn't even brought it up. Each night, he would kiss her and hold her, make her feel safe and warm. He wasn't happy about Ethanule's presence on the ship, she could tell. But she also knew he was itching for answers almost as badly as she was. She was just worried what those

answers might be. After all this time, wondering where she came from and what came to be of her people...now she was afraid to know.

The book had been brought to Sebastian's room and sat on the coffee table...unopened and neglected. Anya would stare at it sometimes, like right now, feeling a flood of contradictory emotions.

Ethanule had said her people were at war and needed her help. Was she being selfish by ignoring the possibility that he was telling the truth? But honestly, what could she do about it?

“Blow up a room full of electronics,” she said dully.

And maybe that was enough. She had no knowledge or prior experience with war. Had no idea what to expect or how to proceed. The demons did, along with much of the crew, but she wouldn't ask them to get involved. It wasn't their responsibility. *But is it mine?*

Furthermore, if Ethanule was telling the truth, how could her father have had the insight to plant Ethanule in her path, in the right place at the right time? Had he somehow set up the contract between the Serakians and Sebastian? And just how much did he know about where she'd been for two hundred and some odd years?

She was clueless, and she knew it. She needed answers. Snatching up the book, she made her way toward the one man who could give them to her.

Anya slammed the massive book down on a small table just outside of Ethanule's cell. She thought his cell would have included the plush pillow and blanket that she was allotted, but he had none. She felt a twinge of

irritation at that, along with an even stronger sense of sentimentality from the memory.

Ethanule's face lit up when he saw her. Hardening her features she demanded, "Tell me everything."

He tsked. "How can you expect me to remember anything under these harsh conditions?"

"These conditions are hardly harsh, and you know it."

"It is lacking," he replied. "Compared to what I had your cell furnished with? Which I'd say was more like a bed and breakfast."

She had to admit, he had her there. "I'm not in charge here. I have no say in how you're treated so perhaps you should have taken better care of the demons, rather than me."

"Oh, but you do have a say. Otherwise, I suspect I'd be in a much more dingy cell, without the comforting companionship of the good doctor over there."

From his desk, Doctor Oshwald humphed, not bothering to look up from his electronic notepad.

"At least, that's what the female demon was muttering when she was manhandling me."

"Her name is Sonya, and in any case, there's nothing I can do about it now. You may be in here for a while, so you'd better start talking."

"You haven't been eager for information thus far. I've been feeling pretty neglected, actually." When Anya rolled her eyes, he grew serious. "Look, I've risked my life and spent a lot of resources, time, and dignity, lowering myself to a common pirate, to get myself in a position to find you. I was a soldier in the king's elite army before I was sent on this mission. Do you think it was easy to become a high-ranking leader within the ranks of an entirely different race of people? And now that I've left them, I can never go back and claim the leadership I had worked three

hundred and fifty years to acquire. It has already been passed on to my second. I gave it up to follow you.”

“Why! Why go through all that trouble?”

“Because you are the daughter of the king, third in line to the throne.”

Anya blinked twice. Breath left her. Words left her. *It couldn't be.* “What?” she mouthed.

“Over four hundred years ago, your father sent you and your two sisters away, just before the great conflict began. A conflict that is still under way. Our planet has been under siege since you've been gone.”

Stunned, she replied, “I'm only two hundred years old. You have the wrong person.” She wasn't sure if she was relieved or disappointed by that.

“With one hundred percent certainty I can guarantee, you are who I say you are.”

She shook her head. “How can you be sure?” Was it possible that she'd lost more time on the Hell Ship than she'd originally thought? How long had Darius kept her unconscious while he had her hooked up to the ship? It couldn't have been over half her life...Could it?

“The book,” Ethanule interrupted her thoughts. “Have you not tried to open the book?”

With her eyes vacantly staring at nothing, she shook her head.

He continued. “That will prove it. Only the three daughters of the king will be able to open it.”

She stared at the book with hesitation. It was mysterious and dark, and threatened to turn her world upside down...again. “How do you know any of this?” she asked mindlessly.

“It's complicated.”

She narrowed her gaze. “Yes, you've said that before. I think you and I both have time for a complicated story.”

“And I want my freedom.”

“I've told you, there is nothing I can do...”

“Bullshit.” He crossed his arms and clamped his mouth shut, signaling that he was done talking.

She sighed. It was obvious she'd get nothing more out of him, and she wasn't ready to test out his book theory. Whether she didn't *want* to know the truth, or she wanted to hold on to a bit of fantasy just a little longer, she wasn't sure.

She lifted the book firmly in her arms and turned for the door, pausing at the threshold to ask, “At least tell me the name of our people.”

He studied her for a moment. “You truly don't remember?”

“No.” A mixture of sorrow and shame coated her voice.

“We are Faieara.”

CHAPTER 22



Faieara he'd said. Fai-ear-ra, with a roll of the tongue on the last syllable. Anya tested out the word as she made her way to the pub, book in hand. She was flooded with a strange feeling at finally being able to associate a name with her people. It was sort of a half-empty, half-full feeling. She now had a small part of a very large puzzle.

Her plight must have been written all over her face for everyone to see, because when she entered the pub, Sonya took one look at her, motioned her to an free bar stool, and started mixing one of her unique concoctions. Anya took the seat, setting the book beside her, and lifted the pink liquid to her lips. The flavor was sweet and went down smoothly as she gulped.

"Bad day?" Sonya mused when Anya set the empty glass back on the bar. She immediately began refilling it.

"I'm a princess," Anya blurted.

Sonya raised an eyebrow at that. "Is that so? It's not a bad thing to be, I guess. Unless..." Her eyes twinkled with amusement. "Do they sacrifice princesses where you're from?" Anya was counting on Sonya to lighten her mood with her flippant personality, but when the question made Anya think a little longer than she should have. Sonya said in a more serious tone, "No...do they?"

Anya shrugged. "I don't know. All I've learned so far is that my people are called Faieara and they may be involved in a war that has spanned four-hundred years or more. My father sent me, my mother, and apparently two of my sisters away, to avoid capture. And oh, yeah, did I mention I might be over four hundred years old, if what Ethanule says is even remotely true, which I don't know for sure. And somehow he thinks, at least, I believe he thinks that I am somehow capable of helping our people." She tapped a finger over her temple. "Did I leave anything out?"

"Oookay. Take a breath, everything will be fine." Sonya was looking at her like she was crazy. "What about the book, what does it say in there?"

Slumping her shoulders, she said, "I haven't opened it."

"Why not?"

"Because only three people in the universe can open that book, according to Ethanule. And if it does open for me, then...well, that makes everything real. And if it doesn't open...?" She didn't finish her sentence.

What exactly would it mean if it didn't open for her? She would still be a Faieara. Ethanule was definitely one of her people. She'd known it on some level the moment she was close enough to feel his energy, she just hadn't recognized it until he'd thrown the obvious in her face. But she wouldn't be a princess...with a father. A father who'd sent her to the Hell Ship and left her there for possibly four hundred years.

Sonya wore a mask of sympathy, but her words were cogent. "Either you are who he says you are, or you're not. Whatever you find out, we're still here for you."

Anya's lips thinned into a half smile. "Thanks. It's just, I'm so close to finding out who I am, finally. But what if he's wrong?"

With a crooked smile, Sonya replied, "I don't know princess, what if?"

"Princess?" Cale appeared from behind her.

"That's what the pirate told her she is."

“And you're going to listen to that schmuck?” Cale lifted the book off its stool and placed it on the bar, taking the seat for himself. Then he began fumbling with it. “Well? What's inside this thing that's so important we had to fly it all the way across the universe in order to find out that it belongs to Anya?”

Anya opened her mouth to respond, but Sonya answered for her, “She hasn't opened it yet.”

“Why not?”

Anya paused, mid-shrug, when an interesting thought came to her. “Why don't you try to open it?” If Cale was able to open it, then everything Ethanule claimed would be in question.

“Fine,” he said and began pulling at the book. Anya took a sip of her drink while she watched. “There doesn't seem to be any kind of lock on it, just this flap that won't budge.” He wedged it between his legs, trying to pry the cover apart. A vein bulged in his forehead. “Feels like it's glued shut. If we traveled all the way here for this, then someone is going to pay.”

“Sonya, why don't you try?” Anya suggested.

Sonya nodded, reaching for the book. Dejected, Cale handed it over the bar, where Sonya too began grappling with the cover. At first glance it looked as though the flap was just resting against the book, but not even a corner of it had moved for them.

Sonya set it on the bar in front of her. “Now you try.”

Anya hesitantly lifted her hand over the flap. At the barest touch, a tiny invisible shock wave exploded, with the book at the center of it. A small jolt smashed into Anya. Both Cale and Sonya jumped at the feel of it. Anya's body began to prickle with the tingle of magic. That was the only word she could use to describe it. *Magic*. It was utterly foreign and vastly familiar at the same time. It pulsed through her body like a living thing.

When she began to pull, the leather effortlessly peeled away. It was as easy as separating two dull magnets. She could feel the resistance, as though the flap wanted to return to its rightful place, but it easily relented under her touch. A comforting vibration rolled through her arm and down her spine, like a warm embrace.

A flash coated her mind, and suddenly Anya found herself sitting at the base of a tree. Yet at the same time, she knew herself to be in Sonya's pub. The thick trunk was wider than the length of the bar. Wider by two at least. Great roots rose up from the ground around her. Fresh cool air filled her lungs, damp from a recent rainfall.

The ground under her was littered with wet leaves, twigs, and mud. Soft sounds of water dripping from one leaf to another surrounded her. Thumping. In the brilliant blue sky, two suns sparkled down through the forest canopy above. One sun was large and white in color, and the other was slightly smaller and glowed with a yellow hue.

In the distance, she could hear the infectious laughter of two female children. She covered her own snickers with two hands as she crouched in her hiding spot. Waiting.

Gasping, she dropped the flap of the book, and the vision disappeared. "My gods," she whispered.

Cale grabbed at the book. "Why did you drop it? It was opening." He pulled at the flap, but once again the book would not budge.

Sonya seemed to be more observant, because she asked, "What happened?"

"I saw my home. I...I really do have sisters. I remembered we were playing a game. I was so happy."

With confusion, Cale put the book back on the bar and opened his mouth to speak, but then a beautiful brunette with a slim waist and a low neckline appeared at his ear. Her hand slid across his shoulder. "Can I buy you a drink, Calic?" she cooed.

Cale turned to her with a knowing smile. "Sure, luv. I'll be right with you." Satisfied, the woman left, trailing her hand along his back as she went. He turned to Anya. "So...what now?"

What now, indeed. "Now I learn everything." With that, she lifted the heavy book into her arms and left the pub.

Ethanule lay on the uncomfortable hard metal of his bed, staring up at the ceiling, arms behind his head. He wondered if Analia had opened the book yet. She seemed a little taken aback when he told her she was a princess to their people. Her father had told him that her memory would be fuzzy, but he hadn't anticipated this complete lack of knowledge. Perhaps it was only because Princess Analia had been the youngest of the three.

A sudden scent of meats and cheeses filled Ethanule's nostrils, and his stomach growled for satisfaction. When he looked up, he saw the female demon entering with a plate of food.

He'd like to say that the introduction of the food brought him to his feet, but he'd only partly be lying. The demon had demonstrated strength and bravery on his asteroid. She'd fought the longest after being shot with the same drug that had taken down her demon kin. This female demanded respect, even if she was just a demon. And she wasn't bad to look at either.

With venom in her eyes, she walked toward him. "Hungry?" she snapped. Her tone was contradictory to an offering of food. She must still be angry about being captured.

He hid a smile and faked nonchalance with a shrug.

“Not hungry?” She hovered the plate over a nearby trash can. “I’ll just get rid of this then.”

“Well, if you’re just going to throw it away. I don’t approve of wasting food.” He held out his hands as if to take it, though the force field was still in place.

“Oh, you want it then?” She held out a piece of meat to him like a master to a pet.

Crossing his arms, he raised an eyebrow at her. “Look, demon, either give me the food or throw it out, I don’t give a damn either way.” His stomach chose that moment to betray him with a growl, and the sexy little demon quirked a triumphant smile. “Did you only come here to torment me?”

She set the tray down, and he tried not to notice her curves through the thin clingy material of her shirt, or that impossibly short skirt she wore. Her tail flicked when she looked back and caught him staring. Her smile was gone, replaced with a hardness that didn’t fit her.

“I came to judge for myself.”

“Judge? I’m a prisoner. I think everyone’s made up their minds. What’s more to judge?”

“You said a lot to Anya. Maybe it’s true.” She turned her violet gaze on him. “And maybe it’s not. If it’s not true, I warn you now to come clean. Because if you fill her head with false hope...” Her eyes flashed red. “You won’t live to see what Sebastian will do to you because, pirate, I’ll make sure I get to you first. And I’ll rip your entrails through your gut and make you watch while your insides are being torn from your body.”

“Graphic.”

When she bared her tiny fangs, he put his hands up in surrender.

“Everything I told her is the truth.”

The demon tilted her head, deciding whether or not to believe him. Her eyes had gone back to their original deep violet and, brows furrowed, she

looked troubled. "So, she's really a princess?"

"Yes, the youngest of three."

"And what happened? Why was she sent to that place?"

"Like I told the princess, I'll offer no more until I'm freed."

The demon narrowed her gaze. "You're a pirate."

"We've established this."

"Pirates in general are untrustworthy. You'll do and say anything to get what you're after. So, pirate, what are you after?"

The princess, his mind supplied. It was her he wanted, even though he was ogling this demon female before him. Princess Analia was promised to him by the king himself. "I wasn't always a pirate. I'm just trying to save my people."

"How long have you been a pirate?"

"Three hundred and fifty years," he answered without thinking.

"That's a long time of taking what you want with no consequences. You must have grown fond of the lifestyle."

That was true enough. He'd had to act the part for so long he was no longer sure if he was a soldier or a pirate. He'd had to do a lot of underhanded things to get into the right position. Was it all for the princess, the King, his home? Or was a little bit of it for himself? He did enjoy it more than he thought he would.

"That's what I thought," the female said.

"I didn't say anything."

"It's all over your face. Once a pirate, always a pirate."

He'd prove her wrong about that. It had been his duty. He was a loyal soldier, doing a king's bidding. And now he would focus on being a loyal and honorable husband to the princess. The demon turned on her heels without another word, her hips swaying as she went.

"You know you're not bad looking for a demon." Maybe he was a little more pirate than he wanted to admit.

“You are not even slightly good looking for a pirate.”

After many hours of scanning the area, Sebastian finally felt they were in the clear. If *Extarga* was anywhere near, their scans would have picked up its signature.

Cale, smelling of lust and alcohol, came to take command and relieve Sebastian. He didn't have the energy to chastise him. After debriefing Cale, Sebastian left, eager for his Anya.

He didn't have to look far. She was in his room, seated on the couch. Her book was spread open on the coffee table, and she was clutching a piece of paper in her hand, staring grimly out the window. As he approached, she turned to him. The look on her face tore at his insides.

“What is it? What's wrong?”

She said nothing, only held out the paper in her hand. He took it and began to read.

My Dearest Analia,

I cannot begin to convey the depth of my remorse for the injustice you have unwittingly been dealt. The punishment for my failure has become yours to bear, and I beg your forgiveness for it. I promise you, the decision to send you away had been sudden and eminent. I had not the time to fully see. All I could decipher from my visions was that sending you away would eventually bring you back to me, and back to our people, but the rest was muffled. If I had knowledge of the atrocities that would befall you and your

dear mother, I would have gladly given up my kingdom, and condemned our people to their fate.

Your mother will be greatly missed.

However much I wish to, I cannot change the past. What's done is done and I must be strong for our people. So must you. Now is a time of great tragedy among the Faieara. Shortly after I had you and your sisters removed from our planet we were attacked and overtaken by a swarm of destruction. They call themselves Kayadon.

At the word Kayadon, Sebastian's fangs descended. It was the same people that had destroyed his home. Sebastian's mother and Cale's mate had been convinced to betray their race for those murderers. He read on:

The Kayadon live only to consume, and our planet is plentiful. They also live for power and have usurped my throne. Our home has become my prison and I have become nothing more than a figurehead to keep our people compliant, while the Kayadon ravage our lands.

I sent you away to give you and your sisters time to grow into your powers. The reason you must grow into your gifts is because your destiny, along with your sisters, is to return to our home, and trigger the rebellion against the Kayadon. We may defeat them yet. I have seen this as a possible future.

As with all my visions, there are many possible futures. None are set in stone. And for our people, many end in tragedy. But the quest I have sent you on is the only future I must believe in. If our people are to survive, you must find your sisters and bring them home.

The book you now possess is filled with the information you require for success. Follow my instructions. Find your sisters. Save our people.

I believe in you, and I love you.

Alestar

King of the Faieara.

Your father.

“Where did you get this?”

Anya pointed to the book. “It was behind the cover.”

“And what else is in the book?”

“The first few pages are written in a language that I can't read. After that, there is information about my planet and the Kayadon. I only skimmed through it.” She sounded hurt, scared, and defeated. “How am I supposed to do what he asks of me?”

He sat, pulling her against him. “We'll figure it out. Ethanule said he can decipher the text. We will find your sisters, and we *will* defeat the Kayadon.”

“I can't ask you to get involved. It's a huge risk, and it's not your fight.”

“I am involved. Where you go, I go. I vow to keep you safe. Plus, it is personal. The Kayadon destroyed my home planet. They killed and enslaved my people. You have no idea how badly I...we, would love to take them out.”

Anya's eyes widened and it took her a few moments to speak. “Just like that, no discussion with your family, or the crew? What about those who don't have a personal grudge against the Kayadon?”

“Everyone will be given a choice. They can either leave the ship or join the fight.”

Anya shook her head. "It's too much to ask...people may lose their lives. I couldn't ask that of anyone."

"You want a discussion? Fine." He took her hand and helped her stand before pulling her out the door. He knew what their answers would be, but Anya seemed to need to hear it from them.

"Aidan," Sebastian called when he entered the control room. "Take command, Cale come with me."

"I just got here," Cale complained.

Without another word, Sebastian left, still pulling Anya with him. Silently, Cale fell in step behind him. Next they gathered Marik and headed to the pub.

When Sebastian had everyone seated he turned to Anya. "May I read part of the letter?" She eyed the note for a moment before giving a tight nod. Sebastian began a few paragraphs in, leaving out the personal preface. When he finished, he looked up, his gaze met by six sets of flashing red eyes.

"This letter was found inside the book. I don't know about any of you, but I no longer believe in coincidences. Something larger is at work here. Anya came to us for a reason."

He couldn't help but glance at her. Her head was down and her hands were fidgeting in her lap. But she was leaning toward him slightly, a small sign of trust. He placed a hand on her shoulder, and she rested her cheek against it.

"Anya will not ask for your help, but I will. This is not an order. It's an opportunity to take our revenge. I'm going to do everything in my power to avenge our people and hopefully save hers in the process. It's your choice to come with us or not."

The entire bar had fallen silent. Sebastian had spoken loud enough for all to hear. Within an hour, word would spread.

Sonya stood. “Of course we're coming. We've all dreamt of ripping out Kayadon throats. I can't believe you thought you even needed to ask.”

Cale's fists were clenched tight, eyes glowing red while rage pooled around him. Sebastian knew his thoughts were of his fallen mate. He could smell the faint draw of blood from Cale's nails gouging into his palm.

Marik mirrored Cale's anger. The painful loss of his sister was something he always kept to himself, but Sebastian could see it now.

“Well, how do we find these sisters of yours?” Cale growled.

Anya met Sebastian's eyes before answering. “Part of the text needs to be translated.” Which meant—

“The pirate,” Sonya practically snarled.

“He won't do it. Not while he's locked up,” Anya said.

“Oh, he'll do it,” Cale assured. “Or he'll become acquainted with my claws.”

“We can't keep him locked up. It's not right,” Anya continued. “Besides, he wants to help, just as much as you do. He lost his home too.”

That quelled any further protest. Anya was right of course, but that didn't mean they had to like it.

“He'll be freed for his help.” Sebastian's voice rang out with the air of a leader, not to be questioned, though he knew that what he was about to say next would be met with screeching protest. “He'll be expected to work.” Sebastian shot Sonya a meaningful look.

“No. Don't even think about it.”

“Anya cannot work both in the galley *and* here at the pub, while continuing her training with Cale and learning about her people. The pirate will take her job in the pub.”

“The pirate has a name,” Anya said, though she went ignored.

“Damn it, Sebastian!” Sonya roared. “He can't be trusted. He'll probably just hide out in the back drinking all my liquor like the degenerate he is.”

Anya interjected, "He's not a degenerate. He was a soldier—"

"I don't care if he was the freaking king himself, I don't like him and I don't like this plan."

"Please, Sonya," Anya implored.

Sebastian thought Anya must have some special gift of persuasion because with that simple plea, Sonya relented.

"Fine," she said through gritted teeth. "But if he doesn't do his job perfectly I reserve the right to slash his throat."

"No," Sebastian interjected.

Rolling her eyes, she replied, "Kidding. I'll just rough him up a bit before I kick him out of my pub."

CHAPTER 23



Sebastian entered sickbay, seeking Ethanule alone. He dismissed the doctor and pulled up a chair near the cell where Ethanule was lazily watching his every move. The faint buzz of the force field cut through the silence.

Then Ethanule spoke with the air of authority that Sebastian was used to adopting himself. A telltale sign of a practiced leader. “What brings the great captain to my neck of the woods?” he asked.

Sebastian had a hard time trusting this male, but Anya did, and he believed in her. “You're being offered a small window of opportunity to prove yourself. We've decided to offer you a position as part of the crew. This means you will work for the privilege to stay aboard my ship. If you fail in any way, you will be extracted to the closest space city and left behind. Do you have any questions thus far?”

“Yeah, what do you mean by work?” Ethanule rolled onto his back, staring at the ceiling as if Sebastian were nothing more than an amusing guest.

“You will work in the pub. It's run by Sonya, my sister. She is not fond of you, and will be watching you closely.”

“Sister? Is this the demon female that was with you on the asteroid?”

Sebastian nodded.

Ethanule laughed. "She hates me."

"Yup, so you'd better work hard."

"Where is Princess Analia? Does this mean she believes what I've been saying?"

"What this means is that you're being given a chance to prove that you're trustworthy. Anya is anxious to get the book translated and find her sisters. We are eager for revenge against a common enemy. The Kayadon destroyed our planet." Sebastian paused. "If there is anything you need to tell me, now is the time to say it." Ethanule remained silent, still concentrating on the ceiling. "Because if something comes up later, something we should have known now, your credibility will be destroyed in an instant, and you'll be right back here, or worse. Think about that."

"I want to speak to the princess. I'll say nothing without her present."

Sebastian leaned in, and Ethanule finally met his gaze. "I'd like to believe we're on the same side, you and I. I'd like to think that you are loyal to your people and your king and your planet, and you went through whatever you went through for those reasons alone. I'd like to believe that. But at this point, I can't rely on what I *want* to believe. Throughout my years I've known despicable people and I've learned the importance of caution. I've learned not everyone can be trusted at first glance. Like you, for example. You make me nervous. I don't know you. My instincts say not to trust you. But, for Anya's sake, I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt." He looked Ethanule deep in the eyes. "Don't make me regret that decision." Then Sebastian stood and turned off the force field.

Ethanule bolted upright. "No making me swear my allegiance? No need for a heartfelt declaration of my honesty and loyalty?" He said sarcastically.

"I wouldn't believe you if you did." Sebastian turned toward the door, and Ethanule followed.

“Are you taking me to the princess?”

Sebastian grated his teeth. Ethanule's interest in Anya was unnerving. It might be all in his head, but there seemed to be more behind Ethanule's actions than a desire to help his people. It was in the way he spoke of her, the way his eyes had sparkled when he first saw her, and the way they'd gone dead when she'd been in Sebastian's arms. Sebastian shook the thought away.

Anya was waiting for them by the door of her old room. The heavy book sat at her feet, leaning against the wall. A light flowing dress, the color of her eyes, draped around her. She smiled when she caught sight of them, and the tension in Sebastian's shoulders eased a little. He scooped her up, and she gave a little squeal of delight. In the next moment, his lips were on hers in a kiss that was meant to show his affection, but was also a warning to the other male. A show of what was his. Ethanule irritatingly cleared his throat, and Sebastian noted that the man's features had gone cold.

Interesting.

“Good evening, Princess.” He gave a respectful bow.

“Please just call me Anya.”

Ethanule straightened, “Princess Anya.”

“No, just Anya.”

Ethanule looked uncomfortable being offered the casual use of her name, but he covered it quickly, replying, “Anya, then.” He bowed again.

“And no bowing, please. It's just too...strange.”

“Of course, prin...Anya” He smiled, as he had to halt another bow. “You can call me Ethan.”

Sebastian interjected, “This will be your room for the time being.”

Ethanule glanced down at the book. “Shall we get started translating?” Anya eagerly picked it up and Ethanule motioned for her to enter the room, as if he'd lived there forever.

“I don't think so.” Sebastian stayed her with a hand to her elbow. The two of them in a room together, alone? Not happening. “Anya, I'm sure Ethanule wants to take a moment to clean up. Maybe get something to eat or rest.” Before Ethanule could protest, he added, “I'll arrange for a room to be set up for your research. You can begin in the morning.”

“That's not necessary. Here is fine,” Ethanule commented.

“It's no problem. I will be sure you have everything you'll need.” And make it impossible for any private moments, Sebastian added to himself. He began guiding Anya away.

She halted. “What about food? Aren't you going to show him to the salon?”

“He can follow his nose.”

“Bastian, you're being rude.” She turned. “Ethan, when you've finished cleaning up I'll show you where you can get something to eat, and if you're not too tired we can talk about the book.”

Anya waited patiently outside Ethanule's room as he showered and dressed. She had to argue briefly with Sebastian to get him to leave and gather fresh clothes for Ethan. Eventually he'd gone, and returned minutes later, panting as though he'd run the entire way. His behavior was strange.

Ethan emerged fully dressed in the baggy ill-fitting pants and shirt. His white-blond hair was still wet and tussled. Ethan smiled when their eyes met, and she politely smiled back. Sebastian's changing energy smacked into her, and she shot him a questioning look. Arms crossed, his limbs were stiff. What was going on with him?

“Shall we?” Ethan said, offering her his arm. Not wanting to be impolite, Anya took it. Sebastian's energy shifted again, and she got a very strong impression that he was nearing what he called the Edge. But why?

“Oh, the book!” Using it as an excuse to let go of Ethan, Anya turned to Bastian, placing her hand on his tightly crossed arms. He looked at her and seemed to come back to himself. When she reached for the book, both males did too.

“I’ll get that,” they said in unison. Two muscular hands gripped the book at the same time. Then they both began tugging, lightly at first. Anya backed away at their odd behavior, watching with confused fascination as they each refused to let go.

“Guys?”

They both turned hardened faces at her. Ethan’s lips curved as he released the book. “By all means, you can carry that,” he said, intertwining his arm with hers once more. “I am famished. Will you show me to the salon now?”

Suddenly, Sebastian had her other arm, and they began walking in an oddly linked group. Anya was too stunned to react.

In the salon, she quickly squirmed out of their grasp and ducked into the galley for a moment alone.

Marik waved a spatula at her, keeping his attention on the hot pan in front of him. “Something tells me you’re not here to work.”

“I’m hiding.”

That got his attention. “From?”

As best she could, she explained the odd behavior. Marik gave her a knowing look, and she thought she was about to get an explanation. He glanced out the small window into the salon. Bastian and Ethan had taken a table, sitting across from each other, their unbroken glares trained on each other. Both males were oozing animosity.

Marik grumbled a curse. “You’d better get back out there before they kill each other.”

That’s it? No excuse?

Reaching for a heavy pan, he added, "I'll bring some food as quickly as I can."

"Oookaay." She made her way to the table and took the open seat next to Sebastian. His lips twitched in what seemed like an unspoken taunt toward the other male.

This couldn't be all about her? Could it? That would be ridiculous.

"Listen, guys, I get that there are some hurt feelings about what happened on the asteroid and then what happened on this ship, but you're even now. You were both locked up for a while. Can we please call a truce and try to work together?"

"My feelings aren't hurt." Sebastian was still glaring at Ethanule and vice versa.

"Neither are mine."

Anya rolled her eyes. Luckily, Marik was true to his word and the food was on its way. Thick cuts of meat smothered in a dark sauce. As soon as the food was in front of them the men began stabbing at it, shoving each bite roughly into their mouths, while staring hard at each other. Anya chewed her food methodically as she watched the scene play out.

"So Ethan," Anya began, hoping to get the conversation back on track. "Why is it that only part of the book was encrypted?"

With a softer look, he turned to her. "The king thought it would be safer, in case the book fell into the wrong hands, that the locations of the princesses be obscured in code. I have the key, but it will still take some time to decipher."

"He has the ability to see the future?"

"Sort of. He told me once that it was like seeing through a thick fog. The further into the future, the harder it is to see clearly. He also told me that following the timeline is like following the branches of a tree. Any one direction can turn out to be correct. But then, sometimes branches cross and new, entirely different paths are set."

“So this mission he's sent you on could be a flop?” Sebastian said callously.

“Bastian,” Anya chastised. “Ethan, have you been in contact with my...father?” It felt so weird to say the word aloud.

“It is said that His Majesty also has the ability to project himself, but he's not come to me since the day I left, and I have no way of getting a message into the palace.

“Project himself?” Sebastian sounded slightly more sincere.

“I've never seen him do it, but I've heard rumors. Supposedly, for a short period of time he can send his conscious out of his body. Those who have seen it say his projection looks transparent, like solidified smoke.”

Her heart jumped and she covered her mouth in shock. *The vision of the old man.* Could that have been her father?

“What is it?”

“I think I've seen him. What does he look like?”

“Last I know, he had wavy short hair, light grey. He's a little taller than you are now, thin, straight nose, ice blue eyes like you. You are the one who resembles him most.”

He'd been there all those times when she was ready to surrender to insanity. His presence, for reasons she'd never known till now, kept her from losing her mind completely.

“I always thought he was a delusion of my mind.”

“That means he must still be alive. I'd had my doubts.” Ethan trailed off, recognizing the war behind her eyes. “Princess...”

“I know. If he could have done something more, he would have. He did help me though. He kept me from...well...seeing him helped me get through it. He always knew when I needed him most.” She swallowed the lump in her throat.

They finished their meal and agreed to meet in the morning to begin deciphering the book. Things got weird between the two males again when

Ethan kissed her hand and wished her a good night. She was beginning to see a pattern.

In their bedroom, she asked, "Why were you being so rude to Ethan? He only wants to help."

"*Ethanule*," Sebastian emphasized his full name, "wants to do more than just help."

"What does that mean?"

He gave her an exasperated look. "He's Faieara, you're Faieara. He sacrificed a part of his life to find you. It's obvious he wants you." More than obvious, the man was practically holding up a flashing sign.

"He does not."

"He does. I know he does because I want you just as badly." *More*.

"You have me."

"Not yet I don't. I haven't claimed you." Not like he needed to. "And I won't until you ask me to." He felt her slipping away from him. Why would she need him when she was so close to getting back to her people?

"I do want you to, but I'm just not ready."

"And if Ethanule does want to be with you?"

"He doesn't," she groaned. "And I wouldn't."

He could see she was growing impatient. "Are you so sure?" Was it his imagination or was that a flicker of doubt that crossed her face?

"Of course I'm sure. And I'm finished with this conversation. Be nicer to him, or else."

"Or else what?" he challenged.

“I'll find somewhere else to sleep.” She knew just where to hit him.

“With him? I'll kill him before that happens.”

“I'll bunk with Sonya. Ethan wasn't even a consideration, but thanks for the vote of confidence. Ethan has no interest in me, besides the fact that I'm his princess and our people are in need of help. Your assumption is beyond ridiculous. If you keep treating him, me, like this...”

“What?” he grated when she trailed into silence.

She crossed to the bathroom, opening the door. With her back to him, she turned her head. “You'll lose my heart forever.”

Then she finished her devastating blow with a quiet click of the door.

The next morning was awkwardly silent between them.

The night before, when Anya had finally emerged from the bathroom, they hadn't spoken. She'd briefly eyed the couch before deciding to slip into bed next to him, stubbornly turning herself away.

He hadn't reached for her like he had wanted to. He'd been angry that she didn't believe him, didn't trust him, dismissed him so easily.

However, this morning he was seeing things from a different angle, and he suspected the reason Anya had gotten so angry with him was because he didn't show any trust *in her*. He knew she would never hurt him by accepting Ethanule's advances.

Anya was dressing now, preparing to leave, to start her daily routine, without a word. She wouldn't even meet his eyes. He hated this. The distance between them was like a thousand galaxies. He had to do something about it.

“I'm sorry about last night,” he started.

She stopped, mid-shoe, finally meeting his gaze. She looked tired, as if she hadn't slept a wink. “I am too.”

He grabbed her hand, gently pulling her to him. “I want you to know that I trust you, completely. More than I've ever trusted anyone, which is saying something.”

She rewarded him with a genuine smile and leaned in for a kiss. He wasted no time, pulling her as close to him as he should have last night.

“Thank you,” she said against his mouth.

“Don't thank me yet. I still don't trust *him*. Don't give me that look. He peers at you like...”

“Like what? Like he hasn't seen one of his own kind in, oh, I don't know, four hundred years? Or like he finally, after so long, thinks he found the key to saving his people and going home? Finally on the verge of completing his mission?”

“All those things may be true. But there's more, I just...” He paused. “My instincts are on high alert when he's near you. I don't like it.”

Anya stroked his jaw, her eyes tender and understanding. “You have nothing to worry about. I promise you, he's no more interested in me than he is in Sonya.”

CHAPTER 24



*A*nya traced her finger over the cool metal framing the book cover. Something inside her sparked with electricity every time she came in contact with it. Its ancient magic sang to her. The book seemed to pulse in recognition of her.

Ethanule stood to her side, silent, as though he too felt the magic.

They were sitting in a room Sebastian provided. She'd laughed when she first saw it. It was practically across from the pub. She'd already spotted Sonya peeking her head out at them. There were no doors, only archways, giving the illusion of a room without being enclosed by four walls. One thing she appreciated was that he'd supplied them with computers, in case they needed to look up locations or other relevant information.

Sebastian hadn't stayed long after bringing them here. He'd kissed her goodbye and then stepped into the pub for a few seconds before heading toward the control room.

Their fight the night before was unnerving. He'd shown no trust in her, and she'd reciprocated the feeling. She felt terrible about it, but she truly believed that Ethan just wanted to help. She had probed his energy and found nothing that indicated he was attracted to her.

Gently lifting the flap of the book, she opened it to the first page. Excitement and relief radiated from Ethan. He began looking over the encrypted pages with earnest.

Anya watched him work, not being of any more use than providing the way in. Out of boredom, she studied his features. He was handsome, she supposed. Not more handsome than Sebastian by any measure. His pointed ears peeked out of his blond hair. It felt nice seeing the oddly shaped feature on someone else.

Ethan caught her eyeing him with a quick glance. "You're staring at my ears."

She just smiled and shrugged. "I've only seen them in the mirror." When he went back to his task, she tried to occupy her mind with other things, but soon became restless. "Ethan?"

"Yes," he said, still scanning the book.

"Will you tell me about our home planet?"

His lips curled slightly, yet he seemed saddened. His eyes gazed past her as if he were seeing far away. "It's beautiful. Towering mountains, deep valleys. Some trees are so large they seem to touch the suns. Do you remember anything at all? Our two suns, and the three moons?"

"I get flashes every now and again. Not much to go on. I wish I could remember more."

"Most of our people favor the warm regions. Cold disagrees with us, don't you agree?"

"Yes." She'd always hated the cold. "What else?"

"Our society is a free society. Well, it was anyway. Used to be that you could choose your own path in life, whatever that may be. Our markets were rich with traders and merchants and entertainment. You could walk through our town center on market day and not even see a quarter of what was available. As a princess, you would have attended festivals and parties. Your only care would have been what to wear to each." He quieted.

“We'll defeat the Kayadon,” he said, as if it were a fact. “Then, after the wedding, I'll show you everything our planet has to offer.”

“Wedding?”

He nodded, scanning a finger down a page. “Once we are wed, I'll take you through the forest of lights, which is actually so thick with canopy that it's shadowed in darkness year round. It's called the forest of light because the creatures that live there have evolved to illuminate parts of their bodies.”

Anya heard nothing after wed. He took her stunned silence the wrong way.

“Don't worry, it's perfectly safe.”

“Excuse me, but, did you just say *we* and *wed*?”

Ethan seemed confused by her question, averting his attention from the book.

“What makes you think we would wed?”

“Well.” He uncomfortably rubbed the back of his neck. “It was agreed upon...by the King...that once I returned with his daughters, I would be rewarded with the privilege to marry one.” His cheeks slightly darkened.

Anya could kick herself. Sebastian had been right and she'd ignored his instincts, had even become angry with him. But Sebastian's fear hadn't really been that Ethan wanted *her*. It was that she would want him back. Suddenly, like a jolt to the brain, she was struck with a deep understanding—the truth of her feelings.

“Ethan,” she sighed. “I love Sebastian. With everything in me, I love him. And I choose him.” How could she fear being tied to him when she loved him so much?

“But, he's a demon,” Ethan said, as though that explained everything.

A snarky voice came from behind. “I'll take a demon over a pirate any day.” Sonya stood just outside the archway, two full glasses of water in her hands.

Anya felt Ethan's energy spike as Sonya handed one of the ice filled drinks to her.

“Yes, but you are a demon,” he said.

Sonya grabbed her tail and looked at it with utter surprise. “So I am.” Her voice dripped with feigned awe. “And very soon this demon is going to be your boss. Your ass is mine, pirate.” Sonya considered the glass in her hand. “I have no idea why I brought two of these,” she said and turned to leave, her tail swishing behind her.

“I have a real talent for pissing off demons, don't I?”

“Just try to do what she says,” Anya pleaded. “Be respectful.”

“Pirates don't do respect.” He gave her a teasing grin.

Anya rolled her eyes, but couldn't prevent her smile. “I can tell we're going to be good friends, Ethan. We're okay, right?”

“Yeah, we're okay. I kind of got the feeling you were going to reject me anyway. Well, I'd better keep looking for my future wife.” He turned his attention back on the book.

After a long uneventful shift, allowing him nothing but time to obsess over Anya's proximity to that male, Sebastian entered his room. Once again, he'd spent the day battling the Edge.

He would shower and then go to her. Demand his right to lay his mark on her. Claim her once and for all. It was the only thing that would put him at ease.

He was caught by surprise when he entered the bathroom and saw Anya. Very naked, very wet, and covered in bubbles. Her pert breasts

peeked through the soapy water lining the tub, strands of damp blond curls trailed around them. Sebastian's boots had become glued to the floor, his mind emptied of all but the vision in front of him.

“Bastian.” Her eyes sparkled with lust. A finger glided down the crevice of her breasts. “I need you.”

All the blood in his body invaded his shaft. He had his clothes off in seconds, tossing the last piece away just before he hit the water. Waves sloshed and spilled over the side. Anya gave a very seductive victory laugh that was soon nothing more than moans against his mouth.

With his rough hands, he caressed her skin, raking his way over her soft flesh until he met her core. Her head lolled, and she gave a sigh of approval, the faintest of smiles on her lips. An involuntary shiver rolled through her body and her hips bucked into his hand.

“You want more?” he asked, his voice was like gravel.

“So much more.” She sighed. Blue eyes peeked out at him through heavy lids. There was a seriousness in her words.

He dipped his head to take a hard nipple between his lips while delving his thick finger into her. Eyes flashing to silver with her desire, she gripped the edge of the tub for support while her body surrendered. When he felt her slick and ready, he replaced his finger with his thick shaft.

Her hand found the back of his neck, and she pulled him in for a smoldering kiss as he eased himself deeper. Her unusual aggression was surprising, but more than welcomed. He liked to be in charge during sex, but he'd let her take control if she wanted.

His thrusts became harder, faster, causing her to break the kiss and scream her pleasure. He loved that he could do that to her. The little sounds she made provided fuel for his fire, and he increased his pace. Gripping her backside, he held her firmly against him for deeper contact. Her body writhed, begging for release, as his did too.

Just as their orgasms were about to peak she whispered into his ear, nails digging blissfully into his back. “I want your fangs in me.”

His seed exploded forth in blinding pleasure. Her back arched, body strained from her own orgasm.

Their eyes locked as they caught their breaths. “Are you sure?” He panted.

She nodded, moving her golden locks aside and presented her neck to him. It was almost too much to believe, yet here it was. She was giving in to him, accepting his claim.

“What changed your mind?” Why was he asking this? Why hadn't he already sunk his teeth into that soft flesh? Even now his fangs throbbed with anticipation.

She dropped her hair and gazed up at him, as if she were wondering the same thing. Her cheeks flushed to a beautiful pink hue. “You were right about Ethan.”

Grinding sounds filled his ears. He realized it was his teeth. “Uh-huh.”

“Turns out he made a deal with my father for the right to marry one of his daughters.”

“And which daughter would that be?”

Crunch.

Sebastian had been gripping the tub too hard. An indenture in the shape of his hand now decorated the edge.

Her eyes widened. “It's not me!” she bit out. “I told him I was in love with you.” Her mouth clamped shut, the pink in her cheeks turned to a deep red.

She loves me. Me!

This beautiful, perfect in every way, ethereal creature was finally about to be his forever. The smile that crept onto his lips felt unreal, like he'd stolen something that should never have belonged to him, but had come to be his most treasured possession.

“Gods, I love you so much,” he grated.

Anya's shoulders slumped in relief, and her expression was elated. She began pulling aside her hair again.

“Not here,” he said. She paused, smile fading. “I want to make this good for you.” A yelp escaped her when his eagerness took over, and he lifted her to carry her to the bed. Their bed.

Silver eyes sparkled up at him as he laid her down and sat back to study her for a moment. Droplets still clung to her skin. Tendrils of hair were pasted to her shoulders and the sides of her breasts. She made his mouth water. Never had a more beautiful creature ever lived. And she was his.

Unable to delay another moment, he leaned down, pressing his lips to hers. She opened easily for him, inviting him in. Hot tongues met, dancing. A chuckle escaped him when she wrapped her legs around him to pull him closer. His little Anya was getting aggressive indeed.

Unclasping himself from her hold, he kissed his way down the line of her body until he found her tender core. She cried out his name when he began his wicked kiss. He teased her with his tongue until her body trembled under the onslaught of her orgasm. He could stay here forever, making her wiggle and writhe, but it was time to claim his mate.

Her eyes widened when he began crawling up her body. He worried she might be about to change her mind.

Body still rolling with pleasure, Anya watched Sebastian make his way up the length of her. His expression was fierce. An already pounding heart

began to race. Was he about to bite her? Would it hurt? He'd said it would be pleasurable. What if that was only true for other demons?

He took her mouth in a scorching kiss, breaking away her thoughts. He pushed his shaft against her, rubbing their slickness together.

In a voice so rough it sounded more like a beast's, he said, "Do you want me?"

Heart drumming, her answer came quick, "Yes."

"Forever?"

"Yes."

He shoved into her with the strength of a lust-maddened demon. The sweetest pleasure assaulted her senses. Practically lifting her hips off the bed, he thrust into her again and again, building her next orgasm to a peak, filling her full of more pleasure than she thought her body could contain.

She felt his sharp fangs sink into her neck.

Ecstasy was a word she'd never truly known before. Not until this moment. The energy between them shattered, exploded outward. Her body quaked at the unbelievable feel of him inside her. She found she was screaming, but only from the mind-blowing pleasure. It was almost too much to bear.

Then he began to suck, drawing her blood into him. Her vision faltered, specks of light flashing in her eyes. With his breath on her neck, his lower half continued to move between her legs. She'd never felt so connected to him. She wanted it to last forever. And with him, it just might. Somehow she'd captured this magnificent male, Anya thought with a wicked internal grin.

When he drew her blood again, her mind went blank. All she could concentrate on was the incredible sensations he was giving her. She couldn't hold it in any longer. The orgasm ripped a sound from her lungs she'd never before heard herself make. Vaguely, she registered a myriad of

popping sounds as the room delved into darkness. Bastian released her neck, joining her, their cries of passion mixing in the air around them.

Finally, his body slumped beside her. But he didn't let her go. He pulled her against him, laying kisses on the top of her head and streaking his hand down her spine. She sighed with satisfaction, burrowing deeper into his chest.

They lay there like that, basking in each other for a long while. Not speaking, just touching, kissing, loving each other.

Then Sebastian chuckled, which soon grew into a hearty laugh.

“What's so funny?”

“You broke my bulbs.”

Confused, she was about to ask him to elaborate, then she realized the room had been illuminated when they'd started and now there was none. In her ecstasy, she'd unwittingly destroyed all the light bulbs in the room. Embarrassed, she buried her face in his chest and couldn't help but snicker when he continued to laugh with joy over the destruction they'd caused. Soon they were both holding their sides, unable to quell their humor.

Once their mood died down, Sebastian examined the small wound at her neck. “Does it hurt?”

“Not at all.”

He dipped his head to give it a flutter of kisses. “You have no idea how gratifying this is for me,” he said, melting her heart with a look that said she was the most wonderful thing that had happened to him.

“It was pretty gratifying for me too,” she said with a sultry smile in place.

A sinfully wicked grin, full of masculine pride crossed his lips. “Yeah, I kind of got that. Guess I'd better invest in candles.”

She play smacked his chest, and he brought his hand down on her backside. Anya reveled in their intimacy, eating every bit of it up, but, for a fleeting moment, worry clouded her thoughts. He noticed.

“What is it?”

Eyes lowered, she said, “I just hope you don't come to regret this one day.”

Lifting her chin, he gazed at her with so much love in his eyes it almost hurt. “That could never happen.”

I hope you're right.

Still riding a high from the night before, Anya did a horrid job during training. She was too happy to fight. Frustrated, and in a more than usual crabby mood, Cale sent her away early, muttering under his breath. She thought she'd heard the word mate, but decided she was just being paranoid. With some extra free time to waste, she decided to see how far along Ethan was with the book. First she stopped by the galley to pick up some pastries in case Ethan was hungry.

With an abnormal expression, Marik handed her the food, then smiled and winked at her.

Hmm.

Ethan greeted her on her approach. He looked excited for the first time since she'd known him. At first she thought it was for the food, but then he explained that he'd made a breakthrough with the code.

“That's wonderful!” Then she noticed the bags under his eyes. “You didn't work through the night did you?”

He only shrugged, eyeing the bag. “Something smells good,” he edged.

Handing it over, Anya glanced at the once tidy room. Papers were strewn everywhere, bits of code written on each one, some notes crossed

out, some circled. She couldn't begin to make heads or tails of it. One of the two computers was endlessly gliding through hunks of code. The other seemed to be switching through pictures of different planets. It was obvious he'd accomplished quite a bit.

“You should take a break. You'll burn yourself out if you continue like this.”

Without warning, a familiar squeal shot at them from behind. Turning toward the noise, she only caught a glimpse of Sonya as the demon smashed into her. Surprisingly strong arms wrapped around her.

“Oh, my gods, oh, my gods! He finally did it!”

Anya sucked in a breath. *She couldn't know.*

But her unending screeches and delighted bouncing said otherwise.

“You couldn't...You don't...How...” Anya sputtered.

Somehow understanding Anya's convoluted babbling Sonya offered, “It's a demon thing. We can just tell.”

Anya felt her cheeks flame.

“We have to celebrate!”

“No! That's okay.”

In a grave voice, Ethan interjected, “I don't want to know what this is about. Do I?”

All Anya could think to say was, “Uh.”

“Didn't think so.” At length, he stood. “Maybe I will get some sleep after all.”

From behind them, one of the computers beeped, demanding their attention. Ethan's mood changed instantly, from hurt masculine pride to hunter. He planted in front of the computer that had been cycling through images of galaxies, and rapped on the keyboard. Curious, both she and Sonya crowded around.

Ethan spoke quickly, “This could be it. The code seems to be pointing me toward a solar system in this particular galaxy.” He started rambling

more quietly, calculating, as if he would be talking aloud whether or not they were there to listen. “Five moons, two moons, eight moons, three moons...” he said as he cycled through images of the foreign planets. When he stopped at the last image, Anya was almost knocked over by an unfamiliar wave of energy.

Sonya was by her side in an instant. “Are you okay? You're not pregnant, are you?”

“What!” That gave her pause. She supposed it was possible. “I don't think so.” For some reason, she looked to Ethan.

Ethan studied her. “Did you take his blood into you?”

“No, of course not!”

“Then it cannot be.” He faced the computer once more, hiding his emotions. But Anya didn't need to see his face to know he was deeply hurt that she didn't choose him. Even though Ethan knew perfectly well that he wasn't attracted to her either.

“So Faieara have a mating ritual similar to ours?” Sonya asked.

“It's not a mating ritual. It's a fertility rite. We don't believe in fated mates like you. We choose who we want.” He averted his eyes back to his screen. “But without the fertility rite, which could be likened to your idea of mating, there will be no offspring.”

“*Idea?*” Sonya growled.

Anya interrupted before they broke out into a full-fledged fight. “This is not important right now. I think seeing that planet is what affected me.”

“Hmm. What a coincidence, this planet is at the top of my list.”

CHAPTER 25



U ndewla, the planet they were currently heading toward in the cramped shuttle ship, was various shades of white and blue, a result of being covered entirely in ice. Ethanule had done some research before they'd left, and the demons had heard rumors of it.

Possibly a clan, or hierarchy based society. The inhabitants were said to be cold, literally. Their blood was chilled, which helped to make the harsh conditions livable for them. They were thought to keep to themselves and typically didn't trust outsiders. They were also said to have domination over the ice, whatever that meant. Their appearance mimicked the snow and ice that encompassed their planet—white hair, pale skin. It would be difficult to find them if they wish not to be found.

Anya stared through the small window of the shuttle as the blue surface of the planet eclipsed her view. She'd insisted on being part of the scout team, which included Sebastian, Cale, Marik, and Ethan.

Once she'd demanded that she be allowed to join them, Ethan had practically forced himself into the group, earning himself a killing look from Sebastian.

But Anya knew he hadn't come in order to try and win her affection. She'd seen in his eyes. He accepted her choice. He came because he was an

elite soldier and loyal to his king. He felt it was his duty to protect his princess. She was grateful to him for that. And she hoped one of her sisters would find him worthy.

“Tell me about the energy you felt,” Sebastian probed.

It was the only reason he'd allowed her to come at all. Anya felt a pull, even now, to this planet. She had no words to explain it other than an encompassing need to get to Undewla as soon as possible. There was an urgency sifting through her with each passing minute.

“I felt a strong energy just by looking at a picture.” She studied the growing planet once more. “I sense something terrible will happen unless we get there to stop it.” If one of her sisters was on this world, she feared she was in some kind of danger.

“If I've deciphered the code correctly, Princess Nadua, second in line to the throne, should be found here.”

Anya hoped to the gods that Nadua had lived a more advantageous existence than she had.

Sensing her troubled thoughts, Sebastian placed a strong hand on her upper arm and made smooth circles with his thumb. “If she's here, we will find her.”

Anya nodded, knowing he would do anything in his power to make that statement true.

Suddenly, she received another jolt of energy. In the cramped space, she made her way to the front of the cabin where Cale controlled their trajectory. The front window wrapped wide around the entire front of the small vessel.

“Do you see that basin with that patch of trees?” she said to Cale.

“You mean that treacherous looking canyon with the thousand tons of potentially unstable ice-wall on either side?”

“Yeah, land us there.”

“Right on.”

After a slightly rocky landing, the group donned their cloaks and heavy boots. All the males began fastening weapons to their person, easily hidden behind their thick clothing.

Cale handed her the sword he and Sebastian had gifted to her. “Your first field test,” he said, wrapping her fingers around the hilt. Trying to feign bravado, she fastened it to her belt, allowing her cloak to fall over it.

Finally ready, they stepped out into what she quickly declared to be the most horrific environment she could imagine. The cold bit at her exposed skin, stinging whenever the wind brushed past. She struggled to bring in icy air that was so cold she feared her lungs would freeze from the effort. They hadn't gone ten steps and shivers were already developing.

“How can anything live here?” Ethan mimicked her thoughts.

“Well,” Cale offered, “when you are the same temperature as your surroundings, it probably works out fine.” He didn't seem to mind the cold. In fact, none of the demons did, though more of their skin was exposed to it.

Ethan noticed as well. “Don't you guys get cold?”

Marik brushed past him. “Internal heating. Come, before you both freeze to death.”

They walked a little way, guided by Anya. She prayed that her gift wasn't on the fritz. Sebastian offered to carry her more than once, but she refused, wanting to be strong for him.

She did cleave to him, however, when small white balls began to fall from the sky. In her alarm, she tried swatting them away, until Sebastian explained it was just frozen water. Apparently, when cold enough, water particles would freeze, become weighty, and fall to the planet's surface. She felt a little silly not knowing this, but nobody faulted her for it.

It wasn't too much longer that the small white balls became *large* white balls, gliding calmly to the ground. If she wasn't so cold, she would have appreciated the beauty of it. White masses of the stuff clung to her

hair and clothes, traveling with her for a moment before melting and dripping down her neck.

It was official. She hated this place!

How could her sister have lived so long in such an awful wasteland?

Sebastian's voice rang out beside her. "Looks like this storm will worsen before long. We should take shelter back in the ship and wait it out."

Anya was all for that plan. She was about to say as much when she caught a whiff of something familiar. Heart pounding, she sucked in a harsh icy breath as emotions assaulted her. Unshed tears pricked her eyes.

Nadua.

"I feel her!" Anya yelled over the sound of the growing wind. "She is close!"

"It's getting too cold. Look at you, your lips are turning purple," he said.

"I'm fine. What if she's hurt? What if she's alone?" When he continued shaking his head, she resorted to begging. "Please." He knew she could never live with herself if something happened to her sister when they were so close.

"She's close, you say?"

Anya nodded, biting back tears.

"Spread out, everyone, but keep in sight of one another." To Anya, he said, "We only have a few minutes." He rubbed his hands vigorously over her arms to warm her.

"Please, Bastian. Go look for my sister. I might be colder than I've ever been in my life, but she could be dying. I'll wait here. Promise."

At length, he nodded. "I won't be far." His warm lips met her icy ones, and then he was off.

After a few lonely minutes, Anya bounced impatiently with nothing to do but think of the cold and her sister. Was she okay? What would she look

like? How could any place be so cold?

A large gloved hand wrapped around her mouth, cutting off her air.

Sebastian trudged through the snow, glancing back at Anya every few moments. She'd been shivering uncontrollably when he'd left her. He'd agreed to look for her sister, but after a quick perusal, he was getting her back to the warmth of the ship as quickly as possible. The storm was already thickening, limiting his vision. Too much longer out here and they wouldn't be able to find their way back.

Atop the summit he saw nothing but white, white, and more white. It was no use. They wouldn't find anything in this stuff. He turned back; ready to gather the group, when his heart stopped at the sight below.

Squinting in the haze, it looked like someone was slowly approaching Anya's back. When the darkened figure wrapped a hand around her mouth and she began to kick wildly, Sebastian sprinted toward them. The Edge came swiftly. Rage coursed through him.

Bellowing, Sebastian watched in horror as the person was dragging his Anya toward something. A ship! His thick thighs kicked harder against the soft snow covered ground.

He almost came crashing to his knees when Anya went limp, body slumping against what now looked like a large male. He recognized the face as Darius' second in command. Fire burned hatred through his blood.

I'm too late!

The shuttle door shut tight, and the ship began to rise. Sebastian threw himself against the door, clawing at the thick metal. "Anya!" he screamed,

knowing it would make no difference. *I've lost her.*

The craft rumbled to life and quickly disappeared into the sky. Sebastian's mind was a haze of chaos. He'd promised to protect her, keep her safe. Promised they'd be together forever. He'd failed her in every way.

Cale and Ethanule rushed up beside him, glancing around wildly for the threat.

“What happened! Where is Anya?” Sebastian couldn't decipher who was speaking. His mind just kept repeating: She's gone. She's gone. Evidently he'd been saying it aloud too because someone said, “What do you mean she's gone!”

Marik came racing toward them with a look of urgency. “Run! The natives are coming. And they're not happy!”

Sebastian cleared his thoughts and took stock of the situation. He was no help to Anya in his panicked state. “Darius has Anya. Everyone to the ship. I'm going after her.”

Swoosh.

A long arrow, attached to a thick rope landed in the snow beside them, as a group of agitated natives appeared from behind the cascading snowfall. Rows of white headed people, all but one was scantily clothed as if the cold meant nothing. One of them, standing at the forefront, was completely covered in skins and furs, a hood covered his features. Must be the leader.

At any other time, Sebastian would have tried for diplomacy. “Let's go!”

They hurried away, dodging arrows and spears. The snow was rapidly falling, obscuring Sebastian's line of sight. He thought he saw their ship ahead, but when he looked again all he saw was a blanket of white.

A roar of agony rang out through the air. They turned to see one of the arrows fixed with rope spearing through Marik's thigh, the rope was taut. A hefty tug caused his leg to rear back, spilling him to the ground.

Clawing at the ground, he slid backwards a few inches in the slick snow. When their eyes met, Marik's were resolute, and Sebastian's heart clenched.

“Go! She needs you more than I! You know this!” When Sebastian hesitated, Marik let go, and he was dragged away, disappearing quietly into the veil of snow.

Marik was a fierce warrior. Whoever held the other end of that rope would surely lose his head.

“Let's go!” Sebastian called to the others still dodging angry projectiles. Leaving Marik sickened Sebastian. If it wasn't his mate in trouble, he would have stayed to fight. Marik understood this, as any demon would. Confident in Marik's skills, he vowed to come back for him once Anya was safely in his arms again.

They reached the ship. Cale took the helm and the ship ascended, swiftly leaving the frigid land and Marik behind.

The familiar feel of cold hard metal aggravated her skin. Stagnant air coated her lungs in the menacing darkness. The familiar drawl of *Extarga* surrounded her.

There was no help for her now. No sweet life with her equally sweet demon. Sebastian's face flashed in her mind, and she had to bite back a sob.

No, there would be no happy endings for her.

Her only consolation was that Sebastian and the others were left behind, eluding Darius' attention. At least they had a chance to return to

their lives, before she'd endanger everyone with her fatuous attempt at changing her fate.

Now that they had the book, they had a chance at saving her people. They knew where to find Nadua, and Ethan could easily decipher the rest of the text. Her involvement had been completed, and she was glad she'd served a purpose.

Her major regret was allowing Sebastian to claim her. She'd managed to ruin his life either way. How silly it was of her to think so long term. Forever he'd be separated from his one mate. She hoped he could move on one day and find happiness. He had the luxury to try. She hoped he would succeed.

Be happy for the both of us.

As it was, she would never forget him. The memory of their time together she would cherish always, even when it eats away at her sanity.

She shifted her body. Her back ached from the lashings. Manacles at her wrists and ankles were attached to heavy chains that clanged against one another as she moved.

How many days had it been? She guessed two or so, maybe three.

Her newly enhanced gifts were becoming a menace. She could sense the people on board and wished she couldn't. Most of them were appalling. Touching their energy made her feel contaminated.

Light flooded the room, burning her eyes. She blinked away tears as a man unlocked her bindings while another stood in the doorway.

Darius.

"The horde is on its way." He sneered and threw something on top of her. She expected it to hurt badly since it landed on her wounded back. But it only slightly stung. Grasping soft material, she strained her tired eyes to see it.

A dress? A finer material than had even existed on *Marada*. She looked back up at Darius, venom in her eyes.

“Be grateful, Analia. I'm about to give you a present.”

He ordered her to put on the dress, watching as she did, with a wretched smile on his lips. She wasn't going to ask about the present, though he obviously wanted her to.

“Not curious?”

Silence.

“Oh come now, you might like to know?”

She turned and faced him.

“Very well, I'll tell you. The demons are coming. I suspect a misguided attempt at a rescue.”

Her muscles stiffened. She forced herself not to react. He was watching her intensely.

“Fortunate for them, no one here needs rescuing. Isn't that right?”

Anya stared right through him.

“Because if someone did need rescuing, then I would have to fight them.” His tone was laced with significant meaning. “I might even be forced to kill them.”

She bit her tongue to keep from showing a reaction. A sick feeling crept into the pit of her stomach. She fingered the expensive gown, waiting till she was sure her voice was steady before she spoke. “You want me to tell them to go away.”

“I want you to convince them that you are perfectly happy where you are, and wouldn't want to leave for the life of you.”

Bile rose in her throat.

“I need them one hundred percent convinced. Can you do that, sweetheart?” He raised a hand to brush her cheek. Swiftly she turned her head away. “Or I could just kill them, whatever you wish.”

“No,” she breathed, her voice hollow. “I can convince them.”

Sebastian barreled his way onto the ship, demanding access. With little persuasion, their small shuttle was permitted to dock. In the back of his mind, he found that strange, but his thoughts were on getting to Anya.

Calic was the voice of reason, along with Ethanule. They'd determined their easy admittance was the beginnings of a trap. Sebastian agreed, but he had to get to her. Was she okay? His chest tightened with worry.

They were led into a medium-sized compartment, a viewing room of sorts. Underfoot was a platform, and above was a balcony lining the walls. The moment he spotted her up there, his heart sang with relief. Until he registered the look on her face.

She looked...smug?

A stunning red gown draped her body. Her hair was up, exhibiting the soft curve of her neck, with light tendrils falling around her face. Her stance was lax, as if she didn't have a care. She seemed...wrong.

"Anya?" he called to her. He thought she stifled a flinch, as if he'd slapped her with the use of her name.

"Demon," she said coldly, her tone like a retaliating blow.

"What is this?"

Her laugh was sharp. The sound of it was horrid. Sebastian's stomach tightened with fear.

"I fear I've played a nasty game with you, demon. You believed it all too well."

"Believed what? Are you unwell? Did they do something to you?" For a split second, he saw *his* Anya in her eyes, only for a moment, then it was gone.

"They've done nothing to me that I didn't want."

Cale jumped in. "So help me, I will gut you, wench!"

Sebastian growled him back in line then turned to Anya. Her expression was amused, cutting at his heart.

Not you, love. Don't betray me.

"Give me a sign, Anya. Are you being coerced?"

Tossing her head back, she laughed at them once more. "And still you believe it. Oh, how this will amuse me for years to come."

"Anya, please!" It couldn't be true. Darius had to be making her say these things. Yet she looked so at ease in her expensive gown, hand leisurely resting on the banister at her front. She looked as if she'd never known a day of suffering. Could he have been so stupid?

"*Anya, please,*" she heartlessly mimicked. Her eyes turned to Ethan. "You too were fooled. Too bad I didn't have more time to play. It would have been fun pitting the two of you against each other." Looking at her nails, she added, "Do what you will with the book, it's no concern of mine."

To his back, Sebastian felt the heat of Ethanule's rage. Sebastian swallowed the building lump in his throat. "Just give me a sign. We can make it out of here. Just give me a sign."

He noticed her throat working hard. She waited a moment before speaking again. "Forget it, demon. It's over. I'm tired of you. Leave now before you irritate me further."

Cale shouted, "I'll kill you, you bitch!"

Anya gave a gesture as if to say, "Well here I am."

Sebastian placed a palm on his chest, in no way enough to stop him if Cale truly wanted to get to her. He suspected Cale was hurting as badly as he was right now.

Facing Anya, Sebastian tried one last time. "This is your final chance. Come with us now, or stay here forever." His tone was harsh, but his emotions were threatening to break him down. He waited, breath held, for

her answer—hoping beyond all hope that she would drop this facade, reveal the old Anya, and run into his arms. “I love you.”

Her eyes grew cold as she stabbed him in the heart with her words. “I don't want you.”

Anya's heart died each time she had to speak. Horrible things were spewing from her mouth, hateful untrue things that stuck in the back of her throat like acid. Cale was quickly a believer, swift to relinquish his trust. Hatred seethed through him. But Ethan was still suspicious. And Bastian...

She was running out of time, needed to convince them to leave.

Pain from the beatings still laced her body. The bruises were covered by the lie of a dress. For a moment she became dizzy and had to grasp the banister to keep from falling over.

Just go, she pleaded with her mind. Save yourselves.

Sebastian wasn't giving up. He was going to fight for her. So she had to say something that would make him hate her forever.

Her throat worked feverishly to keep down her sob. Her eyes strained to hold back the tears for what she was about to say. “I don't want you,” she spat.

The hurt she saw in him just then replaced her pain with something far worse. But when she actually *felt* him switch, felt that he was starting to believe her lying words, she couldn't take it any longer. “Leave this ship now, or die!” Quickly, just as hot tears streaked her cheeks, she left the room, and her love, behind.

None of them would know what she'd done for them, and Sebastian would hate her for eternity.

CHAPTER 26



Dumbfounded and heartbroken, Sebastian stood motionless, staring at the empty spot where Anya had been standing. She'd looked at him with disgust as she effortlessly ripped his heart from his chest.

Memories of his own mother's betrayal flashed in his mind. Anya had sported that same callous look on her face, with not an ounce of remorse.

Betrayed again. By his own mate!

Now he truly understood Cale's pain. How could he have lived through such a thing without plunging over the Edge forever? Even now, Sebastian felt his mind going. He wasn't strong enough to endure this. His stomach twisted in his gut.

A faint voice called to him, "Sebastian, you're losing it, man. Hold it together."

Anguish and rage filled him at the words. He wanted to grab whoever had spoken and wring his neck until it popped. Anya was gone! He had nothing to hold on to; nothing to live for without her.

"Let's get back to the ship and regroup." It was Cale who spoke. Cale wanted him to leave his mate behind!

She doesn't want me!

She'd been cold, distant, and heartless. Not his Anya. But there had been flashes, he recalled. For tiny moments, her old self had shone through. Had her hands been shaking? His mind went to work, evoking every detail. Blond hair washed over her face, shadowing shiny red eyes. Had she been crying? Her voice had been nearly empty until the end when it faintly cracked on her last words. She'd grabbed the wall—for support?—as she'd rushed through the door.

He refused to believe Anya could be so uncaring. She was always too self-sacrificing. Then it clicked. She was sacrificing herself, thinking she could save them. That had to be it.

“Sebastian, we should go.”

“I'm not leaving without her.”

“I know what you're going through—”

“She was lying!”

“Yeah, I know.”

“No, just then she was lying.”

Cale gave him a sad look, opening his mouth to say something more. But Sebastian interrupted.

“I know her. I know her heart. She only said those things because she thought she had to.”

“I want to believe that too, but...”

“Cale, I'm not leaving her.”

His shoulders dropped as Cale acknowledged the resolution in his tone. To Ethanule, Cale said, “If you value your life, pirate, you should get back to the ship.”

“If my princess needs me, I am here.”

Cale nodded. “Then let's rip this crap-hole apart.”

Suddenly, masses of bodies poured into the room, each with a weapon pointed straight at their heads.

Humorlessly, Ethanule quipped, “Go ahead, Cale, rip away.”

Another week in the dark chilled cell, manacles in place. With a profound emptiness, she stared at nothing. Her eyes were dry, drained of all their moisture and frozen in a constant state of shock.

Her father had come to her once. She recognized him now for who he was. But she refused to look at him. She didn't need him anymore and there was nothing he could do. He sat next to her for a time, in his ghostly form, pretending as though he could provide some measure of comfort.

He should leave her be. She'd served her purpose in his ploy. Sebastian was gone. Perhaps they'd found Nadua and were now on the way to retrieve her eldest sister. As he'd said in his letter, her father needed to be strong for their people.

“Go away! I am finished!”

When her father finally left, she hoped he never came back. There was no need for him to see her like this—wasted, resigned, and finally broken. Her heart wept for what it had lost.

For the last week she'd been alone with her thoughts, like parasites eating at her brain.

She didn't care that she was hungry. If they brought food, she wouldn't eat it.

The rumbling ship taunted her from every angle.

A repetitive noise in the distance formed into footsteps, stopping outside her door. The lock clicked and the door swung open, flooding the room with light. She didn't flinch, though the light stung and burned her

dry eyes. The figure moved to unlock the metal from her wrists and ankles.

“Rise,” a voice commanded.

She didn't move, didn't blink.

Strong hands lifted her off the floor, forcing her to stand on her own two feet. Then he pushed her out into the hallway. She didn't wonder at where they were headed. She didn't care. There was nothing they could do to her that was worse than what she'd done to herself.

As they walked, her mind drifted in and out. The man at her back steered her by moving her shoulders in whatever direction he wanted her to go. Turn, walk, turn, walk.

They came to a door and the man lightly knocked. Darius' voice bade them enter, and Anya was shoved inside.

“Leave us,” Darius said to the guard.

The scene at her front had her swaying with nausea. She blinked rapidly to make it disappear, but it wouldn't. Darius was smiling at her! Actually smiling as Ethanule, Cale, and Sebastian stood strapped against the wall. Blood trickled down their bodies. Her voice caught when she tried to scream.

At the sight of her, Sebastian went wild, straining violently against his bindings.

As her heart jumped into her throat, she finally found her voice. “What did you do!” She tried to move toward them, but Darius wrapped a thick arm around her waist and held her back. She was on the brink of hysteria, unable to reach Sebastian, pushing against Darius' vice like grip.

“Calm yourself, my sweet,” he whispered in her ear. She jerked away and continued struggling. “I'm warning you!”

That gave her pause, his tone too familiar.

He wants something from me. He wants something. What does he want?
Her mind went into overdrive. *How can I stop this? I need to stop this.*

As soon as she calmed as best she could, Sebastian relaxed slightly, though his eyes were wide and crazed. In the back of her mind she knew he was on the Edge, probably had been for days. What had Darius put them through?

When Darius felt she was under control, he let her back away from him. "You said you would let them go," she pushed the words through clenched teeth, while studying their injuries.

All of them were beaten and bloody, scratches and cuts all over their exposed skin. Their hands were strapped at their sides. Thick metal around their necks held them firmly against the wall.

Ethanule had a thick gash down the left side of his face. The mark continued under the collar of his sweat drenched shirt. She couldn't see where it ended. He looked tired. They all looked tired.

Cale's face was mangled. One eye was swollen shut, the other was deep crimson. One of his horns had been sliced at the base, and his blond hair was matted with dried blood.

Eyes glowing red with anger, Sebastian's face was generally free of cuts or welts, but by the look on his face, she feared the damage was lower. She looked at his feet and let out a helpless whimper. Blood was pooling there. A lot of it. There was a gash in his clothing near his stomach, the red stain still growing. She spotted a blade dripping with blood on a shelf behind Darius.

Darius' eyes twinkled with amusement. "I never said I would let them go. I just said I needed them to believe you."

To Darius, this was a game. And he was winning.

"You bastard!" She lunged. Forgetting her training, and mad with rage, she went for his neck.

Crack!

Dazed, she found herself on the floor. Her cheek pounded from the hit. The inside of her mouth tasted metallic.

A deafening roar echoed off the walls.

The guard from before peeked his head in at the commotion and laughed when he saw Anya on the ground.

Darius let out an annoyed sound. “I said leave us! Do not come back in!”

The guard quickly obeyed.

Anya picked herself off the floor, meeting Sebastian's crazed eyes. Something flashed between them, love and sorrow, and a wish for something different. She mouthed, “I'm sorry.” and then, “I love you.”

“No!”

Crack!

She was back on the floor.

Darius screamed at her. “No! No! No!”

Sebastian went ballistic. Blood dripped down from the metal bar biting into his neck. He'd break his neck if he kept that up. The other two were screaming at Darius and struggling against their restraints.

Anya pulled herself off the ground once more, facing Darius with hate in her eyes. Lifting herself to her full height, she asked, “What do you want?” Her cheek was throbbing.

With his eyes wide—giving her an idea of what pure insanity might look like—Darius replied, “You.” When she didn't respond, he continued. “I want you to acknowledge me as your master. I want you to say that you are mine.” He growled the last word.

“And if I do? What will happen to them?”

He waved his hand negligently. “They are nothing. What do I care if they go free?”

“Fine, then.” She opened her mouth to do as he asked, but he stopped her.

“Ah, ah, ah, there is more.”

With a sickly feeling, she waited for the rest.

“I want you to be good to me. Very good.”

She cringed, knowing he didn't want her to bake him cookies and do his laundry.

“I want you to make me believe it.” His voice had gone hoarse. When she didn't answer, he moved to pick up a small black remote. With the push of a button, a volt of electricity ran over the wall. The captured men convulsed from the shock of it. Their screams raked her hearing.

“Stop it!” she yelled.

Releasing the button, Darius turned to her.

Never in a million years could she do what he was asking, not without retching all over him. But if it would save her friends, she had to at least agree, even if she couldn't follow through.

Ignoring Sebastian's fevered protests, she pushed the word out, “Fine.”

Darius practically twinkled with triumph. He moved to her and genuinely seemed shocked when she skirted away. Angry, he lifted the remote once more.

“Wait!”

Pausing, hand in midair, he cracked a sly smile.

She wanted to rip that smile off his face. “I want them freed first.”

“I want you now.”

“No.”

He moved toward her again, catching her around the waist. Her back met the ground with him on top of her, pawing at her body.

The noises coming from Sebastian and the others were such as she'd never heard before. Beastly sounds.

Her panic began to ebb, and a small amount of clarity seeped in. With Darius in this position, she recalled her training. Mustering as much strength as she could, she stabbed the butt of her palm into his nose. Head rocking back, Darius grabbed at his gushing nose and then shot her a confounded expression.

Cale too went into training mode. “Good hit! Get up and do it again! Keep him at your front!”

Satisfaction surged through her as she scrambled away and lifted into her fighting stance.

Once his shock faded, Darius gave a little laugh. “Do you think you're brave? A tough little girl?”

They stood in piercing silence. Every now and again, Darius would fake lunge at her, playing with her. She refused to flinch away from him. Darius was a good fighter, but an arrogant one. He would underestimate her, which was her greatest advantage at the moment.

Just as she expected, Darius took his eyes off her to give the imprisoned males an expression that said, “What is this, a joke”?

Her leg shot out, catching him low in the gut, her heel digging in hard. As he bent with a groan, her knee connected with his still bleeding nose, knocking him to the ground. He let out an involuntary grunt. Lowering herself to the ground, she sliced her leg through the air and smashed the hard part of her heel with the tender area of his throat. Wind gushed out of him, and his eyes grew wide with pain.

Oh, how she wanted to continue hitting him, but she needed to free the boys. Darius had underestimated her before, but he wouldn't again, and he would only be incapacitated for so long. She searched him for the remote that he'd placed it in his front pocket.

Got it!

Damn! She only saw the button that triggered the electricity. She turned it over in her hand, looking for the way to release them, but Darius was already rising to his feet, coughing and spitting blood. She faced him again, scanning the room for something that she could use as a weapon.

The knife!

She lunged for it, but Darius caught her wrist and twisted, bringing her to her knees. Crying out, she felt her bones breaking under his grip. Darius

looked down at her with evil intent, no longer playing. He wanted blood. With her free hand, she dug her nails into his crotch, squeezing as hard as she could. He let out a high-pitched scream that would have been gratifying had he not whacked her across the face, sending her head-first into the ground.

He straddled her. Thick fingers snaked around her neck, cutting off her air. She grabbed his broken nose between two fingers, applying pressure to the tender nerves. He growled in pain. Then he raised his fist in the air. He was going to bring it straight down on her. That kind of blow could render her unconscious. At the last minute, she craned her head, dodging it. She heard flesh slap hard against metal. Cursing, Darius cradled his fist.

She slipped out from under him and put all her strength into a kick to his head. She made solid contact and he went limp to the floor. Scrambling past him, she grabbed the hilt of the bloody dagger in her fist. When she turned back to Darius, he was there, nostrils flaring. Moving too quickly, he ripped the dagger from her grip. Hand once again around her neck, Darius pushed her so hard into the wall that her head bounced off the metal.

Then she felt a sharp pain in her side. Her vision went white for a moment. Realizing something was wrong, her mind focused on the hideous face before her. He looked angry, sad, and infatuated all at the same time. Then he shoved the dagger into her a second time.

She was surprised how silent everything became. Past Darius, the boys were still flailing wildly, mouths moving with unheard words. Sebastian had a hopeless expression as more blood spilled from his neck and wrists.

A calmness came over her as Darius lifted the dagger once more. She should have realized from the start that the restraints were mechanized. As the dagger entered her again, she could barely feel it, her body was a shell and she sensed herself slipping away from it.

Gathering the end of her strength, she focused her powers. A strange clarity made her acutely accurate.

Sound came rushing back with a soft click.

Unable to keep the smile off her face, she took one last look at Darius. He was dumfounded at her expression. Then he seemed to notice, for the first time, the blood dripping from her and the dagger in his hand.

With venom in her tone, she spoke the last words he would ever hear. "This will be better than you deserve."

Sebastian's approaching growl was so menacing she felt it in her bones. Darius' scream began even before he was snatched away. With his body no longer holding her up, she slumped to the floor. Heavy lids closed over unseeing eyes.

Oh, but she could still hear.

Bones crushing. Flesh tearing. Scream after harrowing scream. It went on forever, it seemed. In the end, Darius had begged for his life, blubbering like a baby.

When the terrible clamor ended, Anya could sense Sebastian close, barely able to smell his scent over the metallic tinge of blood. She thought her body might be in his arms. He was trying to wake her, but she was already gone.

She wished she could tell him one last time that she loved him, to tell him to be happy, but her mouth wouldn't work. Her airway had already clogged with blood.

As Anya's body fell lifeless, Sebastian's vision went red, and there was no more Edge, just a massive bottomless chasm filled to the brim with his unstable rage. Darius hadn't lasted long after that. His flesh was like butter against Sebastian's claws.

Now Sebastian was hunched over Anya's body, blood seeped from the wounds at her stomach, while her eyes fluttered as though she were fighting to remain conscious.

“Anya!” he called, petting back her sweat drenched hair. She gurgled something. She was mouthing, “be happy.”

Only if you live.

“Please, Anya! Open your eyes! Someone get a doctor! A healer! Now!”

Gods, I can't lose her.

“I will follow you Damn it! You hear me? I will follow!”

“The guard is just outside. If we're not careful, we'll have every gunman on the ship here,” Cale reasoned.

Sebastian clutched Anya close, feeling her grow colder by the second. Tears brimmed in the corners of his eyes. Never in his life had he shed a tear. Not for his father. Not for his mother's betrayal. Not during his torture. But now he openly wept as Anya's heart began to slow its pace.

Suddenly, Ethanule was there, reaching for her.

“Get away from her! Find a doctor!”

Cale appeared behind Ethanule, pulling him away from the enraged demon.

“No!” Ethanule cried, fighting Cale's grasp. “Give her to me!”

“Do you want him to kill you, pirate?”

“I can help her, if it's not too late already! Give me her body!”

“How can you help her? Tell me!” Sebastian ordered.

“My ability. The root of my power lies in healing.”

“Then do it! Heal her, now!”

“I have to touch her body, so don't kill me. Okay?”

With a clipped nod, Sebastian relinquished Anya. Ethanule pressed one hand to her wound and the other to her heart.

Nothing happened.

Sebastian was about to push Ethanule out of the way and order, once again, to find a doctor, when a strangeness fell over the room.

The air began to chill. Sebastian blew out a condensing breath. The cold air became light, difficult to capture in his lungs. All around them, small objects slowly rose from the ground. There were strips of clothing and drops of blood hovering in the air from the mass of power. An abnormal light, dim at first, grew around Anya, bringing with it a sound that could not be described by any known language. Haunting. Beautiful. Frightening. Wondrous. None of these words accurately described what Sebastian was witnessing.

Ethanule reached out toward Sebastian. "Give me your hand!"

Sebastian did as asked. Ethanule placed Sebastian's palm over Anya's heart and held it there.

"Call her back!" Ethanule commanded. When Sebastian gaped at him blankly, Ethanule continued. "If you are truly hers, then your souls are linked. She will hear your call."

Sebastian noticed that her wounds were already healed, body revived. But were they too late? Had her soul already abandoned her body? "What do I do?"

"Just keep your hand here and imagine her with you. The connection will help my magic."

Sebastian did as he was instructed, watching Anya's face. In place of her usual luminescent skin was a dullness that shot fear into him. His chest clenched at the thought of losing her. With one hand over her heart, he took her other hand in his and squeezed gently. "Don't go," he whispered into her ear. "Come back to me." He pressed his forehead to hers, his warmth against her shocking cold. His salty tears dripped down her smooth cheekbones.

Ever so slightly, almost unnoticeable, she inhaled a faint breath. Then she inhaled again, stronger this time. Her skin began to grow warmer,

regaining its color.

With obvious effort, Ethanule sat back, drawing in a deep breath. A light sheen of sweat covered him. Cale slapped him hard on the back with a hearty laugh. Ethanule grunted at the force of it, but smiled anyway. Then he grew serious once more. "It's not over yet. She's healed. Her soul is in place...for now."

"What do you mean for now?"

"Her soul had left her body, her vessel. Her body is in great shock. Her soul is once again connected to this body, but...that doesn't mean she'll wake up."

Sebastian gazed down at Anya, who looked as though she were only in a sound sleep. "She'll wake up," he said it like an order. As if commanding it would make it so. "Let's get back to *Marada*. Don't suppose you have enough juice left to heal us too?"

"Sorry, I'm tapped out."

Cale pushed his shoulders back. "I'm fine anyway. In fact, I'm ready to do some damage."

"Good," Sebastian replied. "You take the front, Ethanule take the back." He scooped up Anya's limp body, reveling in the feel of her strong heartbeat.

Cale threw the door open. His exit was followed by a gurgled, nearly silent cry from the guard outside.

Peeking his head back into the room, Cale tossed a stolen gun to Ethanule. "Here, you'll need this, pirate." Ethanule caught it and Cale winked, disappearing once more through the door, eager for blood and action.

Cale and Ethanule made a surprisingly great team—Cale in front, swiping clear a path with only his claws, Ethanule taking out distant threats with the pilfered weapon. The pirate was a spot-on shot, and soon enough they'd made it to the shuttle.

Swiftly, they piled into the tiny ship, dislodging and jettisoning away from *Extarga* as quickly as the shuttle's engines would carry them. Cale sent out an encrypted signal for *Marada* to pick up their location. If Aidan was on duty, he would see them.

Sebastian cradled Anya against him, brushing back her thick curls and rubbing his thumb across her soft newly healed cheek. He willed her to open her eyes, to look up at him with that familiar sex-kitten smile he'd grown to love.

She didn't.

CHAPTER 27



“*I*’m leaving,” Cale said from the doorway of Sebastian’s room.

It had taken hours, but eventually *Marada* had come for them. Just in time too, the shuttle’s fuel tank was all but empty.

Still Anya slept.

The doctor—at Sebastian’s insistence—had looked over Anya first. Determining that there was nothing he could do to wake her, he moved on to Cale and Ethanule, before irritating Sebastian with his poking and prodding.

Now Anya was tucked in Sebastian’s bed. For three grueling days, he’d refused to leave her side.

“Do you have all that you need?” he said to Cale.

“I believe so,” Cale replied curtly.

Just after they’d arrived, Ethanule had thrown himself into decoding the rest of the book. His way of coping perhaps—just as Cale’s was to close himself off and don a cloak of coldness.

Hours ago, Ethanule had rushed to tell them that he’d discovered the location of Anya’s eldest sister. A lowly planet called Earth, supposedly teeming with life, though unevolved.

There had been an urgency in Ethanule's tone. "The book declares that the Kayadon have been searching for her, and are close to discovering her location," he'd said. "We must leave now to retrieve her, or lose her forever."

An argument ensued. Marik was still lost, and none of them were willing to leave a fallen brother. So a plan was realized. Calic would take a shuttle to the archaic planet Earth—he could stock enough fuel for a one-way trip—while the rest of them stayed to rescue Marik, and hopefully Nadua along with him. Once they did, they would meet up with Cale.

"Are you coming, pirate?" Cale had asked Ethanule.

Sebastian noticed that the title *pirate* was no longer sneered. He had to admit, he too felt differently about Ethanule after all they'd been through together.

"No," he'd said. "I feel responsible for Marik's situation, and I cannot leave Princess Analia like this, not when I can still be of use." With a withering look, he said to Sebastian, "I pray she comes back to you." In response, Sebastian could only give a tight nod.

Sebastian sat beside Anya, looking as though she were in nothing more than a restful sleep. Cale lingered in the doorway, as if expecting something more from him, or maybe just silently contemplating the abrupt shift in all their lives.

"Take Sonya with you," Sebastian ordered.

"Unnecessary. You can't take down that tribe by yourself."

Wry smile in place, he said, "Do you honestly believe Marik would allow himself to be captured for long? I'll bet he's already freed himself and is just waiting patiently for a ride." He paused before adding, "We know little of this Earth, and Sonya's skills may be needed."

"Earth will be easy. According to our records, the people are still running around with sticks and rocks as weapons. They'll probably revere me as their god."

“Just do as I say.”

“She won't be happy.”

Sebastian shrugged. Then Cale was gone. Later Sebastian would find that—in perfect Cale fashion—he'd defied Sebastian and gone alone.

Sebastian knew he couldn't delay much longer. If Anya refused to wake, he would be forced to leave her in the care of Dr. Oshwald, while he started the search for Marik.

Aidan was constantly scanning the surface for any sign of Marik, with no results. Too much fresh snowfall quickly covered any clues that might lead to the location of the tribe that had taken him. They needed someone on the ground.

A blanket of white peeled back. Her body was like air and smoke. There one minute and then gone, flickering. Breathing was impossible, and also unnecessary, so she stopped trying. She had the faint recollection of pain, but couldn't remember what pain felt like. Absently, she reached for her stomach, but her hands passed right through, which was perfectly natural to her, though she felt it shouldn't be.

One second she was looking ahead, then behind, nearly at the same time. She was surprisingly accepting of the instantaneous movements. Everywhere were blobs of white melding with greens and blues. She tilted her head at a flash of orange, seemingly out of place.

When the orange began to grow in size, she strained to focus on it. Then like a wave, all things came into focus. Blotches of green melted together and took shape. Streaks of blue swirled, fanning out above her. Tendrils of green rose up below her. Sprinkles of light blue snaked around her, churning toward the valley below. With it, she should be hearing the sounds of water trickling.

As soon as she thought it, it was so. The scent of fresh grass entered her nostrils. A bird began to sing its loving song as the orange blob solidified, smiling at her with recognition and love.

Who is she? It was almost like looking in a mirror. *Who am I?*

The answer came in a flash: Anya. Analia. Princess. Sister. Daughter. Slave. Lover. Friend.

“Mother?” Anya spoke. Her voice was out of sync with the movements of her mouth, the sound of it dying off into a faint echo.

“Hi, my baby, I've been waiting for you.” Her mother's lips hadn't moved, but her voice was like a harmony of bells. Her blond curls and blue eyes matched her own. A long orange and yellow sundress covered her small frame.

“Why? Where are we?” Again, Anya's voice came out before she could get her lips to work. She decided to stop using them.

“We're in the Fields of Porthina, goddess of transition.”

Which means we are dead.

Though she only thought it, the words came out as clear as if she'd intended to speak them aloud.

“Not entirely,” her mother replied. “You can still go back.”

“Go back?” Anya couldn't remember what there was to go back to. Then an image flashed in her mind. A face: horns, fangs, red, no...gold eyes. “Sebastian!” her heart screamed.

“Yes.” Her mother's lips quirked. “You have a fine male for yourself. I couldn't be more proud of your choice, and of you.” She warmly embraced her, and Anya felt through their connection how much her mother loved her. “Things are set into motion. You have much to do still. The longer you linger in the fields, the harder it will be to return.”

“Can you come with me?”

“No, my love, I have been here a very long time.”

Desperately, Anya clung to her mother. “What happened to you?”

“Betrayed by one of our own, we were given to the wrong ship. Darius saw something in you from the start, and I was in the way of his ambition. I won't say more than that.” She paused. Blue eyes that mirrored her own gazed down at her softly. “We were never intended to board *Extarga*. Though now I see, it was always meant to be.”

“He's dead now, Mother. Sebastian killed him.”

“I know, sweetheart. Sebastian waits for you now. Tell your father I love him, and have never blamed him for what happened. Tell your sisters I'm sorry I could not be with them.”

“Why did you come with me instead of them?”

“You were the youngest, barely five years old at the time. I want you to know that I don't blame you either.”

“But you would still be alive...”

“When it is your time, fate will find you wherever you are. You must go now, my love, before you forget the way.”

“How? I don't know how to get back.”

“Your soul knows where it truly wants to be. Think of your demon and follow your heart.”

Sebastian's face popped into her mind. His eyes were closed and withered looking, beating back and forth as if in a dream. Darkness shaded his face, and she realized she'd never seen him unshaved before. She wanted to feel his skin against hers once more. To be embraced in his warmth, to touch his whiskery cheeks and ease his worries.

Then she was falling.

The ground ripped from under her. The orange of her mother's sundress faded into nothing. With a heavy whoosh, she couldn't breathe, or she'd forgotten how. After fighting through the horror of suffocation, air was forced into her lungs and she inhaled a deep breath. Her chest heaved. Everything felt heavy and tight.

A frantic sound beat in a steady rhythm. “Anya! Anya! Breathe! Anya!”

Comprehending her name, Anya said dimly, “That's me.” Her throat was horse, as though she hadn't used it in weeks. Eyes cracking open, she saw a blurry Sebastian. He looked panicked. She reached up to stroke his jaw. “No more worrying, okay?”

He fell on her then, burying his face in the crook of her neck looping one arm tightly around her. “Are you truly awake? Or am I dreaming?”

“You're not dreaming.” She wrapped her arms around him, and they stayed that way for some time. When he leaned back, he hovered over her watchfully, as if she'd disappear, his gaze eating up her every feature.

“I thought I'd lost you. There was nothing I could do. I've never been so helpless. Never again.”

“Don't make promises you can't keep.”

“I'll be keeping this one. I'm not taking you into war.”

“Oh yes you are,” she said sternly, shocking both of them with her tone. “Things are set into motion, and I have much to do still,” she echoed her mother's words.

“What more should you have to do?”

She told him of her mother and the conversation they'd had in the Fields of Porthina. Anya had promised to get her mother's message to her father. “He didn't send me to that ship, Sebastian. We were betrayed.”

“That may be so, but you've been through enough. I won't risk losing you again.”

“This isn't your choice, Sebastian. It's mine. I'm going to do what I can to help my people,” she sighed. “I love you, but you can't keep me in a protected box for the rest of my life.”

Shoulders slumped, he bowed his head and held her tight once more. “I know. We'll do what we can to help your people. But I have to know you'll be safe.”

“You can't know that for sure. Anyway, I thought I did pretty well against Darius.” When Sebastian gave her a withering stare, she added, “Besides the fact that I nearly died and all.”

“There is that small detail.”

“I just need more training, is all.”

Sebastian grumbled. “We'll talk more of this later. Right now I don't want to argue when I just got you back.” He swooped down for a smoldering kiss, lighting her blood on fire with a stroke of his tongue.

His fingers caressed the length of her side, trailing down over her hip and back. Anya could tell he was going slow, worried about hurting her. But, surprisingly, she felt great, and more than a little hungry for him, so she urged him on with a pump of her hips. Her tactic had worked because he palmed her behind and thrust back with an almost inaudible groan. But then he slowed once more.

“Are you sure you're feeling alright?”

“Actually, I can't believe how great I'm feeling.” Realizing there was no stab wound, she looked down at her body which was covered in one of Sebastian's large shirts. Lifting the hem, she felt where the wound should have been.

“Ethanule healed you. That's his ability.”

“How convenient. I wonder how much of this is luck and how much is my father's doing.” It was possible her father had seen a glimpse of her future and realized she would need Ethanule specifically.

He dipped his head and kissed where she had been stabbed. Her body quivered under the soft touch of his lips. “Luck or not, you're here with me and that's all that matters.” Once again, he kissed her belly while his strong hands traveled up her thighs.

All thought left her when he slid a thick finger over her heated core. His lips stayed on her belly only a moment longer before they made their

way to where she needed them most. When his tongue replaced his finger, she could no longer hold in the moan that had been gathering in her throat.

She didn't have time to feel guilty for taking pleasure while so many other things needed to be done, because her climax came swiftly. As she cried out, Sebastian did too. He gripped her hips and didn't let go until the pleasure trickled out of her body.

In a breathless, husky voice, he asked, "What was that?" At her confused look, he began to grin mischievously. "I think I just felt your orgasm."

"Y...you did?" She went instantly red from embarrassment.

He just nodded and smiled. She could see he was ecstatic about this. He crawled up her body, circling one taut nipple with his tongue and using his finger to once again caress her wetness. When her body jerked with the building pleasure, so did his.

Her embarrassment almost returned, but then he said, "Gods, I love you so much."

She could only respond with a moan as another climax shook her body. Then he was removing his clothes, and she could only wish she had the powers to make them disappear faster. She marveled at his bare chest rippling with tight simmering muscles. When he hovered over her, she couldn't help but to feel every ridge and valley.

Finally, he slipped inside her. She closed her eyes at the connection she felt, the absolute rightness. When she opened them, Sebastian was staring at her with a look of worship in his liquid gold eyes. She knew he was feeling it too.

With every thrust they both cried out. In and out, they marveled at each other. Sebastian's climax ripped through her, and she came instantly. Both orgasms crashed into each other, mingling in the air and flowing back through them. Neither could tell whose pleasure belonged to whom.

When it was over, Sebastian held her against his chest, thick arms surrounding her. “My mate is a goddess.”

Anya laughed. “That's one way to come back to life.”

“And I'll be showing you all the other ways too.”

EPILOGUE

*R*eturning from the Fields of Porthina—from death—was a jolt to the system that had yet to wane.

Over the last few days, the essence of life, pure energy, had poured into Anya in unpredictable intervals, filling her like a thirsty sponge until she was practically bursting...and then somehow siphoning even more energy into her until she thought she would explode with it. Until she thought she might die all over again.

It was too much. She could not contain it all.

Luckily, she found she could unleash it through vigorous activity. And Sebastian's was always available and willing to lend his body to the cause, even though he had no idea why she suddenly felt the need to jump him at any given moment. She had yet to confide in him, but she could tell he knew something was off.

The first time she'd doubled over by the shock of energy erupting within her, Sebastian had understandably grown alarmed. Her powers had expelling out like a physical force, bending the bulkheads, the ceiling, the floor, until the metal screeched in protest.

His tormented expression had torn at her soul, because she understood that look on a molecular level. He hadn't been worried for his ship or his

crew, nor even his family. Terror had filled his eyes because he believed he could lose her again...to something he could neither see nor fight.

From that point on, Anya had strived to conceal the effects of the burgeoning power inside her. When not slaking herself on Sebastian's body, much of her time was spent in the training room, working to control the outbursts. Oh how she wished Cale were still here to advise her. To push her to master whatever was happening within. She imagined what he might say to her, his gruff words. "What was the point of coming back from the dead if you're going to let this beat you? Focus. Learn to control it or you might as well let it control you."

Before she had come to know Cale as he is now, she understood he'd been trapped on the Edge for much of his life, surrendering to the beast that resides in every demon. She also understood that whatever this was that she was experiencing was only a glimmer of what he'd suffered. She could at least function and feign normality for Sebastian's sake.

She wasn't sure, but intuition told her this might be happening because she had passed to the afterlife and back again. Nature, as chaotic as it seemed to onlookers, was ruled by order, by strict guidelines.

She broke the rules. She cheated death. Was nature attacking her? Trying to restore the balance? Or was this some kind of Faieara sickness?

She'd asked Ethan about it, but he was at a loss. He'd never heard of such a thing, but he had suggested she might be coming into her powers fully. "There are growing pains," he'd said. However, he couldn't be sure if dying, yet not dying, could disrupt the natural process.

Perhaps he was right about her coming into her powers. She could now feel most of the beings on *Marada*. All at once. Their joy, their sorrow, their deepest, darkest—and lightest—feelings that embodied so much emotion there was no name with which it could be appropriately described. *Soul* or *Essence* were the closest words Anya could associate, but even they seemed benign.

She couldn't open up to Sonya about what she was going through. She didn't want her friend, who loved her as dearly as her brother did, to worry needlessly. They all had a task to focus on. To get Marik back and find Anya's sister Nadua. Anya would do nothing to derail that mission. So she tamped it all down, hid it as best she could from them all, and then practiced—day, night, whenever she could slip away unnoticed—to gain a handle on her morphing powers.

Now she stood in the training room, the dummy she'd repeatedly sparred with while Cale had coached her standing in the center of the mat. She'd meant to simply knock it over with a simple push of her magic, but when she swiped her arm out, not only did the dummy fall back with the percussion of her energy, but every piece of free-standing equipment flew into the wall. The hanging weapons dropped from their hooks, clattering to the ground, and the lights in the room burst. The room fell into darkness, and an alarm sounded just as a red hue flooded the room, the emergency lights flaring to life.

She slumped to the floor. "Dammit." Yet her energy waned from the effort, which had been her intention from the start. She only wished she didn't nearly destroy things every time.

Moments later Sebastian rushed into the room. "Anya?"

As Sebastian glanced around, so too did Anya, assessing the carnage with a touch of embarrassment. "My powers are changing," she admitted.

"Clearly." He scooped her up in his arms and kissed her forehead. "I know you've been careful with me, hiding what's going on with you, but I wish you would talk to me."

She sighed. "Sometimes I get overwhelmed with too much energy. I become too restless. I fear my powers will burst out of me when I don't wish them too. And if they do, I fear I will hurt someone."

"Why not just tell me this?"

“I do not want to burden you. You grow irritable when you are unable to solve a problem, and this is a problem you cannot help me with.”

“Sure I can,” he replied, all confidence. “Too much energy, you say? I know of one way I can relieve you of that.” His eyes flashed gold.

She laughed. “You think I have not tried that? Do you remember last night?”

His irises grew warm with lust. “I believe I made you scream my name several times.”

She blushed. “And then we made love until you could literally no longer move. Something that has never happened before.”

A crease formed between his brow as if he was just realizing that. Then his gaze grew troubled. “Did I not please you?”

She cupped his cheek. “You did. Many times. Hence the name-screaming. But afterward I came here to work off the rest of my energy, but it won’t leave me, it just fills me back up again, almost as if....” She gasped. *Oh no.*

He set her on her feet. “As if what?”

“Almost as if I’m drawing it from somewhere...from someone...like when I feed energy to the ship, only in reverse.”

“You think you’re draining my energy?” He seemed skeptical.

“Not just from you...what if I’m draining everyone on the ship. Just by being near them.”

His eyes narrowed. “Are you saying this so I will let you join me on the trip to Undewla? I told you I would never let you on that planet again?”

“Darius is gone. There is no threat of me being taken again.”

“But it is still dangerous down there.”

“I have to know if I’m draining energy from the crew. If so, am I draining their life-force? Am I harming them? The only way to know for

sure is to get away from them and see how it affects these surges of mine. Not to mention I am responsible for Marik being stranded, after all.”

“You cannot blame yourself.”

“But I do. And I will until he is found. Besides, I may be able to use my powers to sense where he is, and my sister, too. That alone could shorten the search.”

Tension played along Sebastian’s jaw. “Brining you, putting you in danger, goes against my every instinct.”

“And you think letting you go alone does nothing to mine? You didn’t just almost lose me, Bastian. I almost lost you, too. We almost lost each other. If Undewla is dangerous for me, then it is dangerous for you as well.”

“Less so, and you know it. The cold will not affect me like it will you.”

“Sonya has introduced me to a seamstress on board who claims to have a bolt of unique material that can combat the cold. I’ve asked her to create an outfit for me.”

“An antifreeze material,” he grumbled, “Yes, I’ve heard. The cold is the least of my concerns. An arrow can kill as easily as the cold.”

Anya pushed away from him and faced the fallen dummy. Arching her arm outward, she expelled her energy once more. The dummy vaulted backwards and crashed against the wall before joining the pile of weapons on the floor. “I am not helpless anymore.”

Sebastian sighed. “I know. You are very strong, but your powers are erratic. What if they fail you at a critical moment? What if *I* fail you? Again.”

“You didn’t fail me. You came for me. We lived and he died. We won. You cannot protect me from everything. Especially if it’s me I need protection from. What if I’m draining the crew? What if this excess energy comes from them? I must find out. Please, Bastian. I must go with you.”

He considered her for a long moment. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it, his shoulders slumping. Finally, he let out a long-suffering sigh. "I have been designing a suit."

"What kind of suit."

Minutes later, they were in the engineering room and Anya was trapped in the stiffest, most uncomfortable outfit she had ever worn. A suit indeed. A cage was more like it. The sleeves were thick, difficult to move, and the helmet was bulbous, making everything outside appear warped. "Sebastian, this is impractical."

"It's heated. It will keep you warm. It has a locator device in case we get separated. Plus, the outer casing can be electrified, so if anyone tries to grab you, boom, they're toast." He grinned with a kind of malevolent glee.

She shimmied forward, the movement awkward. "I can hardly move."

He waved that away. "You won't be climbing mountains. We're taking the shuttle and will be doing most of our searching by air. If we do land, we shouldn't have to travel far. In fact, you might not even need to leave the safety of the shuttle."

She sent him a look. "This is a little extreme, don't you think?"

He crossed his arms. "You want to go. This is my condition."

They glared at each other for a long moment, but finally Anya relented. "Fine, I'll wear it." *Until I can convince you otherwise.*

Sebastian's shoulders sagged with relief. "Thank you."

After he helped her out of the cumbersome thing, he pulled her into his embrace and slanted his lips over hers, kissing her like he'd been starving for her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and deepened the kiss, starving for him too.

Then she pulled back to give him a sultry look. "Now, I believe you promised to relieve me of some of this energy."

He replied in a roughened tone. "When my mate is in need, I am at her service."

The End

* * *

What happened to Marik? Find out in the next sizzling tale **THE DEMON
SLAVE**

* * *

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THE DEMON SLAVE - CHAPTER 1



*P*ain laced Marik Radkov's throat as he sucked in the freezing air. His legs burned with each long stride. The indigenous mob trailed close behind, hollering with each launch of their primitive arrows and spears. Marik thought about turning to attack—he abhorred running away from a fight—but he and his comrades had come to this icy planet with diplomacy in mind.

His captain, Sebastian, suddenly cried out as if in pain, though nothing had hit him. Marik followed his line of sight to the valley below, where Sebastian's mate, Anya, stood in what they thought would be a safe location. They'd left her there to rest, while they searched the area for her sister, Nadua. Now Anya was being threatened—by whom he couldn't see through the blanket of snowfall, but the outline of a craft rested behind her.

His blood turned to ice in his veins as Marik watched the strange man drag her toward the craft. He became enraged when her body went limp and she no longer fought her captor. Fire burned through him, warring with icy dread. He pumped his legs harder, as did Sebastian.

When an arrow embedded itself into Marik's calf, slicing past bone, he hardly felt it. His mind was focused on getting to Anya, and ripping apart

whoever had her. The Edge was growing fast, making pain nothing more than a tickle. Horns glowing in rage, his fangs descended—ready to tear into flesh.

The snowfall, which only moments ago had dusted the ground, had grown into a furious blizzard before he realized. It must have hidden the approach of the small shuttle ship that Anya was being pulled toward.

A tug brought Marik's attention back to the arrow in his leg. There was a rope secured to the thick end. Another hard tug and the ground came rushing toward him as his calf slipped out from under him. He clawed at the frozen terrain to keep from sliding backward. Sebastian had stopped and turned to him, pain and indecision etched in his eyes. When a demon's mate was in trouble, nothing else mattered. The fact that Sebastian hesitated now was a testament to their friendship.

"Go!" Marik ordered. His claws sliced the layer of ice underneath him as another pull forced him back. "She needs you more than I. You know this." The rope went taut once more and when Sebastian hesitated again, Marik let go. He prayed that Sebastian made it to Anya in time.

The cold wetness of the freshly fallen snow, coupled with the hardened frozen ground, assaulted Marik's exposed skin as he was yanked backward. Sebastian's silhouette disappeared into a wall of gray and white. Marik geared himself up to meet his new friends. The pain in his leg became nothing as he invited the Edge, embracing the rage and the extra strength that came with it. He'd never been trained to use the Demon's Edge in battle, but he'd had more than enough experience losing himself to it over the years.

Once invoked, the Edge would trigger the release of chemicals, creating an intoxicating elixir that increased strength, lessened pain, and reduced one to little more than an animal running on instinct. Relief would come from either lashing out violently, or sexual release. Neither would be pleasant for whoever was on the other end of that rope.

Voices began to rise from behind the veil of white. They spoke a language he'd never heard before, meaning diplomacy would be impossible at the moment. It didn't matter anyway; Marik would soon be too far gone for rational conversation.

The pulling ceased when the group came into view. A small army of white haired, barely clothed warriors had weapons pointed directly at him. Some wielded arrows and others held swords that gleamed against the bright snow. They dressed as though it were a warm summer's day, rather than standing amid the freezing storm beating violently around them.

With his claws at the ready, Marik lashed out, making solid contact with the nearest body. A yelp and a crimson trail of blood urged him on. Though his captor's skin was bluish, their blood still ran red. Marik needed to see more of it.

A group of the indigine leapt on him, yelling and attempting to restrain him with their hands, while others approached with ropes. With a roar, Marik slammed his body into them, successfully beating them away. A man with a sword sliced at him, the blade coming close to his neck, but Marik was quick.

Two more with swords rushed to the front. Twisting his body, Marik managed to avoid the sharp blades. At their backs, a group of archers nocked their arrows, targeting him.

His vision blanched red as the Edge flooded through his veins, deadening his mind to anything but survival.

One of the assailants thrust his blade forward. Marik easily dodged, smashing his head into the other man's skull. With a small grunt, the man dropped to the ground.

Through the fog, Marik couldn't tell how many he was fighting, just that they kept coming—which was fine by him. He could do this all day.

Blood stained the unfallen snowflakes as Marik continued slicing through flesh. Soon he stood on a bank of red snow. He vaguely registered

a few arrows embedded in his torso. When had that happened?

Footsteps charged from behind. Marik crashed his elbow into the attacker's nose, dropping him on the spot, but more quickly took his place.

A single voice rose above the rest, yelling in that language he couldn't understand, but the sound broke through his rageful mind. Marik faltered in his step, only slightly, but enough to lose his advantage. A barrage of hands and ropes surrounded him, and he was thrown up against a tree. He lashed out with his body and the ropes began to snap. Then that voice came at him, slowing his movements once more, only this time the voice spoke in a language he knew.

“Stop, demon!”

Marik blinked twice. More ropes came around him, fixing him to the cold bark of the tree, but he was stunned. Before him stood a small, furbundled creature holding a bow, arm stretched back, ready to release the arrow trained on Marik's forehead. The only identifying feature he could see through the thick layering of furs and skins was the eyes—ice blue, deep as a cavern, and sucking him in like a wild storm.

A heavy object knocked against Marik's skull and his vision went black.

Nadua gazed down at the unconscious demon.

While the creature had fought, she had marveled at his immense strength and fluid movements, even as her men were being cut down with ease. His injured leg hadn't hindered him at all.

Her gaze rolled over his powerful frame. His shoulders were packed with strength and his waist slim. The shirt under his long jacket was thick but tight against his chest. She had watched the cords of his muscles flex as he assaulted her elite guard. If he hadn't been hurting her soldiers, she could have admired him all day.

When she had finally noticed the blood being spilled, Nadua realized she needed to end the chaos. Loading her bow, Nadua aimed for the demon and yelled in the Cyrellian tongue for him to surrender. He hesitated slightly at the sound of her voice, but continued fighting as her men gained ground against him. She knew it would be only a matter of seconds before the demon broke free of their hold. On a whim, she'd switched to a language more commonly used by space travelers that she'd learned as a child, and ordered him once again to stop. Had he not stilled when she'd ordered, she would have put an arrow in his brain.

Now, as Nadua knelt beside the fallen beast, one of her soldiers called out, "Your Majesty, you should not get so close. It could wake any moment."

Nadua only waved away the concern and studied the demon further. His features were that of a warrior, strong, just like the rest of him. A small scar next to his ear that twisted down the back of his neck and disappeared under his collar was the only defect. His hair was reddish brown and cut unevenly short, as though he cut it himself and didn't care how it looked. A few arrows still jutted from his arms and legs. He hadn't even seemed to notice they were there.

Demon warriors were legendary, but this was the first one she'd ever seen. And she was impressed. She could use someone like him on her side, though she knew that recruiting him would be impossible. The last time demons came here, they had warred with the Cyrellians. The demons had attempted to claim Cyrellian land as their own, and had fought fiercely for it. In the end, the Cyrellians won, but the battle had been devastating.

"Take him back to camp and clean him up," Nadua ordered. "Make sure he's secure. I will be conducting the interrogation when he is conscious."

"I don't think that's necessary, Your Highness. We can call in a translator."

Nadua speared the guard with a look that ended his objection.

She may not be like the Cyrellians, who were able to ignore the freezing ice storms that constantly assaulted the land—whereas she couldn't go outside without layer upon layer of thick fur—but they would respect her rule.

"I will interrogate him," she said firmly, then changed the subject. "What of the rebel clan? Any sign of them?"

"No, Your Highness. The pack of demons must have frightened them off."

They'd been hunting the rebels for weeks now. She and half her elite guard—about thirty men—had been marching through the countryside hoping to find any sign of the rebel's stronghold.

The rebel clan defected long ago. It was unclear exactly why, but there were whispers of political disagreements. They'd been terrorizing the kingdom ever since, invading the outer city and stealing whatever they wanted.

During their latest assault, a young woman had been kidnapped. The parents had implored *Her Royal Highness* to find their daughter Lidian and bring her home.

By the frequent caravan attacks and rumored sightings, they should be close to where the rebels made camp, but the only evidence they'd seen was a solo rebel male, spotted just across the plateau. The sudden arrival of the demons had caused her group to lose sight of him.

"And what of the other demons?" Nadua asked.

"It looks as though they too have escaped."

Tamir approached, the colors of his tunic a proud reminder of his high rank. She could see he had something on his mind.

"Your Majesty," Tamir began. "I believe the appearance of these demons could mean another invasion." The sneer in his voice indicated he still harbored a grudge toward demonkind, and she was reminded that he

was old enough to have lived through that tumultuous time, though he must have been but a boy.

Nadua inclined her head and scanned the depths of her mind for an insightful vision. Unfortunately, her magic was tempestuous, and her visions came to her randomly and without warning, no matter how hard she tried to force them.

“I agree, send word to Wren. He is to put additional guards on Ava immediately. Also inform him that we will be returning sooner than anticipated.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Tamir turned and walked away, signaling to a lower-ranked soldier as he went.

Ava was the rightful ruler of the Cyrellians, and Nadua was sure she would one day prove to be a great queen. The only problem was Ava was just fifteen years old. Her father, Fineas, had, on his deathbed, charged Nadua with protecting the crown and keeping Ava safe from those who would see themselves on the throne. Ava had been only two years old at the time. When the decree was made that Nadua would be the proxy queen, not everyone had been happy about it.

Nadua, for one.

There had been an uproar from not only commoners, but those who were closest to the crown. Had it not been for Wren’s loyalty to his king, and thankfully to her and Ava, she might not have had the power to take control of the situation.

Nadua hoped she was strong enough to safeguard Ava’s crown until she came of age. She owed it to Fineas for taking her in when her own planet had come under attack, and for being so kind to her. He had always treated her like a beloved daughter. It was a tragedy that he’d had four hundred years with her, yet only two with his actual daughter.

Though she owed him, and would do everything she could to keep her promise, Nadua was eager for the responsibility to be taken from her

shoulders. She was never meant to rule, even over her own people.

Kyra, her eldest sister, had been groomed from birth for the task, not her. If her home planet hadn't been attacked, and most of the royals ferried to safety among their many allies, then Nadua would have lived out a glamorous life as Princess Nadua and nothing more.

Oh, how I wish I were home.

But then she wouldn't be here to protect little Ava. Over the years, Nadua had watched her grow from innocent toddler, to the sweet and caring young adult she was today. After watching her, helping in her schooling, and joining in her childish pranks, Nadua loved Ava like a sister. But sometimes she felt more like a mother.

Nadua wanted Ava to be strong when she finally became queen. So whenever Nadua could pry Ava from her many tutors—not that they weren't doing a great job teaching her, in their soft she-might-break sort of way—she and Ava would “play swords”: Nadua's way of testing Ava's fighting abilities, and making corrections if necessary.

Nadua's mind turned back to the unconscious demon, who was being carried away—not so gently—by a few soldiers. If his people were preparing for another invasion, she must ready the Cyrellians for war.

The prisoner's tent was large and fairly empty, but for a raging fire pit, and at its center, a three-foot-thick, ten-foot-high stake jutting from the ground. The still unconscious demon was tied to it, his hands behind his back.

Nadua stood close to the fire, gathering what heat she could, waiting for the demon to awaken. After sending a messenger back to the palace, Tamir joined her in the tent, followed by his favorite subordinate, Nakul. The two stood away from the flames; heat could be uncomfortable to them, just as the cold was to her.

She imagined, as she had many times in the past, what it would be like to have skin as cold as theirs. To find the snow pleasing as the flakes settled on their skin.

To be able to touch another without burning pain.

Because her skin was so warm and theirs so cold, if she touched the skin of a Cyrellian, both would burn at the contact. It often made her sad that she could never give Ava a simple hug without being careful there was no skin-to-skin contact. Nadua hadn't felt a true painless physical touch since she'd left her home planet more than four hundred years ago.

With her hands stretched out to the dancing flames, she gazed at the demon. His shirt had been removed, in order to clean and mend the many arrow wounds. Ancient scars of all sizes and shapes trailed along his torso, around his back, and down the length of his arms—blemishes on an otherwise perfectly sculpted physique.

Without his shirt, the demon looked even stronger than before. The light of the fire created shadows against the cords of his muscles, and the scars helped project a sense of danger. Though the marks were faded now, they must have caused great pain when they were made. Nadua watched his chest rise and fall with each slow breath.

Would his skin feel warm and soft?

The thought startled her, just as his green eyes flashed open and immediately found hers.

The drowsy demon was gone. A predator sat in his place.

THE DEMON SLAVE - CHAPTER 2



Marik quickly averted his gaze and assessed his situation. Pain laced his body. He was slumped on the chilly floor, in a concoction of sludge and mud created from the melting snow, and tied to a thick piece of wood jutting from the ground. Lingering rage coupled with being tied down threatened to push him to the Edge once more. But the ropes they used to secure his wrists were brittle and could be easily broken.

It was obvious that these people didn't understand a demon's strength. The Edge receded. Marik decided to wait till he was fully in control before escaping.

Two men with straight white hair and a hint of blue in their skin stood to his right. The fur covered creature stood to his left, leaning over a blazing fire. The difference in their dress was extreme. The men wore hardly anything to protect themselves from the harsh cold. Perhaps they didn't need to.

The bundle of fur was openly studying his scars. For some reason, that caused a surge of embarrassment to run through him. Long ago, his scars brought him unmitigated shame—not born of battles won or lost, but of punishment. For most demons, wounds healed without a mark of their existence, but his *masters* had been harsh, wanting to leave their mark on

him by making him bleed and not allowing him to heal properly. Marik thought he had left the humiliation of his scars in his past, until now.

He scowled at the mass of fur. Their eyes locked. Her iridescent blue eyes grew wide for a moment, before regaining their composure and turning away. An involuntary growl escaped him, successfully forcing those blue depths back to him. Why he wanted that he didn't know, perhaps a play for dominance. Pieces of the Edge still mingled in his blood, causing his mind to be muddled.

"Quiet down, demon," a lithe feminine voice commanded from behind the thick hides. Then, in another tongue, she spoke more kindly to the two males, doubling his irritation.

Marik had learned a number of languages, due to his many diverse masters and their equally diverse speech, so deciphering this one should be a breeze. Unfortunately, Marik hadn't heard any dialect like it before. It would take some time to decode. Luckily, demons were quick learners.

The blue-eyed bundle turned back to him, speaking again in one of the common space languages, though her idiom was old-fashioned. "Demon, I have some questions, and you will answer them truthfully. Understand?"

Marik didn't move at first. He just challenged the creature with his gaze. She challenged him right back, rising to her full height. Of course, her bravado wasn't that impressive. She assumed he was securely tied down, and therefore harmless.

How would her bravery fare when he snapped the rope and took out her two guards, so he could have her at his mercy?

The thought jarred him as much as it pleased him. He wondered if that body matched the silky voice it belonged to.

Marik inwardly shook himself. The Edge, though dulled from the earlier fight, still demanded release, and this female's scent was stroking his desire. He needed to take this situation more seriously.

Marik slowly nodded, curious what she would ask him.

“Are your people here to war with us?”

He wasn't expecting that. Shaking his head, Marik answered, “Not at all.”

“Then why are you here?”

Marik wondered if it were wise to reveal that they came to Undewla in search of Anya's lost sister, Nadua, a Faieara princess who, according to a magical book, was supposed to be hiding somewhere on this planet.

Even in Marik's head it sounded daft.

According to the book, supposedly written by the king of the Faieara himself, who could see glimpses of the future, Nadua's presence was necessary in winning their war against the Kayadon—a race of warmongers in control of their home world.

Coincidentally, the Kayadon had destroyed Marik's home planet shortly after they'd captured him and his sister Misha, selling them both into slavery. Marik cringed at the memory of Misha's screams as they had dragged her away. He couldn't have more thoroughly failed her than if he'd sold her into slavery himself.

The bundle of fur cleared her throat, waiting for his answer. It was possible that these people knew of Nadua, but would they help him? By the nasty looks he was getting from the two in the corner, Marik didn't think so. If he revealed too much information, it could be used against him and his friends. But then, if he didn't reveal anything, these natives might turn to torture. Of course, Marik would destroy them first, but he'd like to avoid that route if possible.

Finally, Marik decided to keep it vague. “We are searching for someone. We have no intention of staying on this planet long. And we definitely do not seek war.”

The woman eyed him warily before conversing once more with the two men. The men began to shout and sneer in his direction, until an abrupt

command from her silenced them, making it obvious who was in charge here.

Incredulous, she asked, "Who is it you seek, demon?"

Shaking his head, Marik answered, "I'll not say more till I know I can trust you. And with me tied up and bleeding, I'd say you'll have a time of earning it."

The bundle of fur nearly choked on a laugh. "Oh, I must earn your trust? How am I to believe anything you say when you attacked my men?"

"As I remember it, they attacked first."

The woman waved away his comment and turned back to her fire. "You were trespassing on our territory. The last time demons came to this planet, they brought with them a reign of destruction not equaled since." She glared at him then. "I will not let that happen again. If your people are planning another attack, I will discover the truth."

Marik was stunned. "Demons have been here before?"

"Don't act stupid. Am I to believe you don't know the history of your own people?"

A low warning growl erupted from Marik, and both the white-haired males pulled their swords. The furry creature stilled them with a look, cutting off their clipped tones.

"Well?" She continued, unconcerned by the threat in Marik's eyes.

"Five hundred years ago my planet was destroyed and my people scattered through the universe. I have no idea how many survived or where they now reside. If a group of demons attacked your people, I would have no way of knowing."

The woman's brows drew together in a surprising show of compassion, though he knew it to be contrived.

Surely the demon was lying, but his story was so close to her own. Nadua, too, was separated from her people and had no way of knowing what was happening back on Evlon.

Quickly, she turned away to hide any show of emotion. The demon would no doubt see it as a weakness. From what she knew of demons, they abhorred any emotion that wasn't anger or hatred, they were strong and stubborn, and they were incredibly lusty. Barbaric, one Cyrellian had said. She had to appear emotionless and prove herself equal, if she were to get any real information.

Nadua would need to use the worst of his traits against him. His stubbornness would be a problem and she couldn't fathom a way to manipulate him by his strengths. Her eyes followed the lines of his sculpted arms. No, that would need to be kept in check. Perhaps his lust could be her ally, but how? There were no other females in the camp besides her. Nadua shivered at the implication.

Could she lower herself in such a way?

She shook the thought away and nearly laughed—while other parts of her seized on the idea. She firmly ignored those parts.

He's quite possibly evil.

Her body didn't seem to care. But it had an excuse as to why it was being defiant. Seeing this male, fighting and winning against her greatest warriors, was one hell of a turn on. She supposed it didn't help that she hadn't been touched in centuries.

The last man she'd kissed had been a Cyrellian named Cyrus, Fineas' brother. It was the silly act of two drunken friends. And though it had been painful, it was her most tender memory. A few days later, Cyrus had died, at the hands of the rebels no less. Nadua had been devastated. A few of his paintings still hung on a wall in her room.

Nadua wasn't quite a virgin, but four hundred years out of practice, she might as well be.

Perhaps one of her maids from the castle could entice him, but by the looks of those burns on his skin, where the guards had handled him, he too couldn't touch Cyrellian skin without pain. The guard that had removed his torn clothing and tied him up had complained that the beast was boiling to the touch.

What would his skin feel like to her?

She scolded herself. Not going to happen.

"So, you claim you are seeking someone on my planet, but won't tell me who, and expect me to earn your trust in order to find out." Nadua couldn't help the twitch in her lip. The demon matched her smirk, and her amusement was lost. She couldn't imagine what business this demon had on Undewla that didn't involve deception.

Perhaps he seeks a fallen brother.

Unlikely, but plausible. Just after the war's end, demon sightings had been frequent, even though what was left of the demon invaders had reportedly been chased off this planet. Sightings were rare these days, but every now and again a farmer from the outskirts would run to the nearest pub shouting about a giant beast with fire red horns that had pilfered one of his animals. Most people just laughed it off.

Was it possible that a demon or two had been left behind when his comrades took flight so long ago? And if so, had this demon and his small group been attempting a rescue? It would explain why he didn't want to reveal his target. And if that were the case, then he lied about not knowing demons had been here, and therefore, he most definitely could not be trusted.

"Rest up, demon, we have a long journey in the morning."

"Oh?"

"I'm bringing you to my home, where you'll have free room and board, maybe a meal or two, and your choice of the many cells in our

prison. There you can think about the whole trust issue and who needs to be the one earning it.”

THE DEMON SLAVE - CHAPTER 3



“*W*hat a generous offer,” Marik replied with a roll of his eyes.

Actually, it sounded like a pretty good deal. A free ride into town. He wouldn’t need to wander around this wasteland trying to find life. Instead, she was going to lead him straight to it. Marik supposed he could stick around for a little while.

With an air of superiority, the bundle of fur left, speaking briefly with the two white-haired men in that strange language. In turn, they gave a small bow and then swung their angry faces toward him the moment she stepped out of sight.

Marik smiled and winked, causing their sneers to deepen.

That woman had mentioned demons coming here. Amazing that they would choose this place. Most likely, the group of demons who allegedly stumbled upon this frozen planet, and thought *what a nice home that would make* were desperate for some reason. The conditions on this planet weren’t suitable for anyone but perhaps these cold blue people. Any demon would have a hard time keeping oneself alive here, let alone thrive in a group.

He found himself wondering how Nadua was faring on her own. She must have survived. Anya had sensed her just as they landed, right before

the wave of blue attackers had interrupted their search. And from what Marik could tell, Anya was pretty accurate in her assumptions. It gave him much relief to know that once Anya was safely back with Sebastian, she would be able to help find him.

He had faith that Sebastian would succeed in rescuing her. *Sebastian must succeed*. If he didn't—

Marik frowned, dismissing the twinge of panic that laced through him.

His thoughts were interrupted by an argument that had started between the two guards. They spoke in hurried whispers while pointing at him every so often. When one of them bent to inspect his bindings, Marik grew curious. The other opened the tent flap wide, as if to exit, giving him a perfect view of the bundle of fur just as she entered her own tent across the way. Then they were gone, leaving the crackle of the fire as Marik's only companion.

Their strange behavior left him with brows drawn, staring into the flames. Their leader's position was revealed. Did they intend for him to see where she slept? Though the one had fiddled with Marik's ropes, the bindings didn't feel any tighter or more secure. He could still break them with a twist of his wrist.

If these people had known demons in battle, they must know how strong his kind could be. They couldn't be so ignorant as to think this meager rope could hold him.

Unless they wanted him to break free.

Now that he thought of it, those guards had been standing farther away from the woman than Marik had been. If he'd wanted her throat, he could have had it before they would have had a chance to react. Any guard worth his weight wouldn't have allowed a situation like that, even if the incredibly dangerous demon was properly secured.

Marik didn't really care if her guards wanted her dead or not. She was of no use to him anyway if all she wanted to do was lock him up. But he

wasn't going to be the one to end her life. Pockets of his past flashed in his mind, images of the arena. He fought the memories back.

No, he wouldn't kill her. Not unless she gave him a pretty damn good reason. And because she was unwittingly doing him a favor by bringing him to civilization, where he could begin the search for Nadua, he needed her alive for the time being.

He also suspected that he was still alive because of her. She only wanted answers, but he figured he owed her, at least a little.

Eventually, Marik fell into a peaceful slumber, until a kick sent him growling into consciousness. He bared his fangs at the offender, who scurried back. Behind the man, seven fully loaded guards stood ready. One of them came forward to cut Marik free from the stake.

Marik stretched his arms and their bodies went tense as they strained their weapons toward him.

"Look, I don't need any more holes in me. It'll just piss me off."

The men exchanged sideways glances, clearly not understanding.

Marik rested one arm on his knee and leaned back against the wooden stake. "Is something happening here? Or are we posing for a picture?" His shirt was tossed to him, and he caught it in mid-flight. "What? No seamstress?" He fingered one of the many tears. "I have a mind to lodge a complaint."

One of the men yelled something, urging him with a flick of his bow to put it on. When he did, the same man continued barking orders. Though he didn't know what was being said, it didn't take a genius to figure out they wanted him up and out of the tent.

As he exited, five more guards were ready for him outside. "I'm flattered boys, but you're still a little understaffed." Marik glanced around. Everyone was packing up. Most of the tents were already disassembled.

Across camp, the walking rug caught his attention. She was kneeling next to an obscenely large brown animal with an angular leather face, filling a sack with supplies. The animal was twice her size in height. Thick legs held up its massive body. On further study, he noted the beast sported fur like the woman's cloak.

For some reason, Marik grew alarmed when the giant's long neck twisted and its head came toward her, but it only pushed at her with its snout, as if being playful. She laughed as she went tumbling, and gently swatted its nose.

Marik wanted to watch her more, but a sharp point pressed into his back, while the guards in front of him parted. Ahead sat a small caged wagon, attached to another one of those large fuzzy beasts, this one with coarse gray fur.

"Great, I get the nearly-dead oversized varmint."

A flare of unease rippled through Marik. Being caged was one of the many horrors from his past. He'd sworn never to let it happen again. But with more than a dozen armed warriors ready to pounce if he showed any resistance, Marik forced his feet forward.

He flicked the metal with his nail and noted the sound of low-quality workmanship. Gods, these people were making it too easy.

Lifting himself with the help of one of the top metal bars, he slipped inside the tiny entrance feet first and the door was closed behind him. "Don't I get a pillow or something? These accommodations are a little bare for my taste. And if you were wise, you'd get the hungry demon some breakfast."

Ignoring him, the guards went about their business, secure in the thought that Marik wasn't going anywhere. He slumped against the bars, and quietly observed his captors.

What was left of the camp was torn down and stored within various wagons. Whenever an order was shouted, Marik paid attention to how it

was carried out. Already he was beginning to learn certain words, cadence, and sentence structure, associating orders with the actions being taken.

Marik craned his neck to see what that woman was up to, but she was gone, and so was her creature.

A bit later, close to the edge of the gnarled woods, Marik caught sight of those two guards from the night before, speaking far away from the rest of the group and glancing over their shoulders as though to make sure they were not overheard. One of them caught Marik staring and gave him a sly smile.

Before long, the troops moved out. His ride was bumpy and he made the inconvenience known, but of course no one understood him. They wouldn't have cared if they could.

Around midday, pellets of snow began to drift in the air.

At the same time, a familiar ragged beast trotted up beside him, with an equally ragged body riding atop it. "Morning, demon. How fare you?"

"I'm dandy, how polite of you to ask. Could use a fresh set of clothes and hot meal, though."

"Oh, absolutely, I'm here to serve. Would you like to look at a menu?"

"If you've got one."

"I'll get right on that, directly after you give me the truth of your intentions here."

She rocked slightly as the beast kept pace, and Marik could almost make out the shape of her body under all that mess. His shaft took note as well. He'd obviously been far too long without a woman if that mere hint of a female form was turning him on.

"If you don't believe what I've said already, then I don't know what to tell you. Anything else I say would be a lie just to get what I want." He paused, waiting for a response. When he didn't receive one, he continued in a sarcastic tone. "Fine, here goes. My friends and I hail from a galactic-

fun-ship, and we came to this planet in order to fill it with candy and cheese.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Cute. I don’t even know why I tried. The deception of your kind is legendary.”

“Have you actually met one of my kind?”

“Aside from you? No. But you’ve already proven the stories to be true.”

Marik couldn’t help but roll his eyes at that.

They rode in stony silence for a moment. The only sound was from the crunch of snow, and heavy snort-breathing from the weird, furry monster. Its wrinkled gray face was the only part that wasn’t covered in tangled brown fur.

“What’s that thing you ride?”

“This is an edisdon.

“It smells.”

“It’s not that bad. Edisdons are a traveler’s companion of choice. They’re strong, and can endure long trips in the harshest weather. They don’t eat much and their fur keeps them as warm as they need to be.” The woman scratched the edisdon’s neck. “And she’s loyal. Aren’t you, Sweetie?”

“She? It looks too ugly to be a girl.”

She covered what must be its ears. “Shh, you’ll hurt her feelings.”

“Oh, forgive me. Let me amend. She’s dazzling in her dreadlock ’do, her step, so light and dainty.”

The edisdon let out a grunt as if protesting his sarcasm.

“And I’m sure the smell would grow on me eventually. How you match her radiance, lady, the two of you must be sisters.”

Her posture straightened. “What a tongue you have.”

“Oh, you have no idea what my tongue can do.” Marik smiled as he sensed her unease. His teasing backfired and he inconspicuously shifted in

his pants.

“Maybe we’ll see what it can do once I’ve ripped it from your head, hmm.”

“You’ll need to put your finger in my mouth first.” Marik flashed a fanged grin. Her blue eyes flared with disdain, which only worked to encourage him. “Tell me, do all the females dress like you and Eddie here? It must be hard for the men to decipher between the two. I can imagine the awkward morning when they’ve found they’d been fucking the wrong species.”

After casting him a look of unmitigated hatred that seemed out of place in those blue depths, the woman rode away.

Nadua mentally scolded herself for letting him get to her so easily. The lying bastard was her prisoner, yet he was the one having fun. He must expect that his friends will come back for him. And perhaps they would, but her people would be ready. They were but two days from home.

“Your Highness,” a voice called. Nadua slowed her speed to let Tamir catch up with her. “One of our sentries has spotted a rebel, just south of us.”

Nadua pulled back on the lead and Sweetie obediently stopped. The rest of the party did as well. “I want to find the rebels too, but don’t you think the threat of a demon invasion is more important right now?”

Tamir bowed his head. “Of course, Your Highness, whatever you think is best, but this could be our last chance to find the rebels. Surely they will move again with us being so close. And the demon is secure for the moment. I hardly think an extra day would hurt. Plus, I have already sent a messenger to the castle. They should be prepared by the time we arrive.”

Nadua supposed he was right. Wren would have everything taken care of before they even set foot into town. “How many were spotted?”

“Just one, but he could be a scout, not too far from the others.”

Nadua’s eyes followed the horizon. It was already midday. With a sigh, she pointed to a high bluff. “We’ll make camp there. After everything is set up, I’ll take half the men with me to search while the other half stays with our prisoner.”

“I’ll go with you, Your Highness.”

“No, I’ll need a leader to stay behind, in case the rebels attack.”

“Of course. I’ll relay your wishes to the others.” Tamir bowed and rode ahead.

It took about an hour to reach the high ground. While Tamir supervised the camp’s construction, Nadua gathered her group and headed out in search of the rebel outpost.

Silently, she prayed for Lidian’s safety.

THE DEMON SLAVE - CHAPTER 4



Nadua sat in her warm tent waiting for a pot of ice chunks and packed snow to melt over the hot coals so she could wash away the grime from the day's journey.

The firelight illuminated her red locks, staining them gold. If she were home at the castle, Ava would be fawning over it while they sipped warm tea. As with Ava, Cyrellians only had hair as pale as the world around them.

Nadua could relate to Ava's envy. Back on Evlon, any gathering, no matter how minuscule, was always a spectacular feast for the eyes. Back then, she often thought her color dull and her curls wildly out of control compared to the elegant hairdos of the other noblewomen.

Now, after four hundred years on Undewla, it was disconcerting every time she walked into a ballroom and her fiery curls stood out in a crowd of a thousand shades of white. By coincidence, Nadua's eyes were the only aspect she shared with the Cyrellians. Icy blue. But Ava would still comment on their uniqueness.

The expedition had turned up nothing. If there had been rebels nearby, they were certainly gone now.

Nadua sighed heavily. They were no closer to finding Lidian, and she was battling a strong sense of failure. Once they returned to the palace, she would send Wren to continue the search. The only redeeming factor about the trip so far was the discovery of the demon presence. But she hadn't been able to procure much information from their tight-lipped captive.

She knew he held important information about the coming invasion. And because of this, she was about to do something that would cause her great embarrassment—unless her plan worked.

The stubborn demon may not submit to questioning, but his earlier behavior suggested he could be tempted by other means. If she failed tonight, she would be forced to hand him over to her warden. And she didn't want to think of all the ways Renzo got his prisoners to talk.

Choosing her outfit carefully Nadua tried to dress as nicely as possible. With a slight tremble, she slipped on her finest fur cloak, which spanned the length of her body and cinched at the waist. A small train brushed the floor.

The robe fell open in the front, and she usually wore her riding clothes under it. Not tonight. Tonight it would serve as a dress of sorts. Holding the bottom of the fabric up, she glanced down at her bare legs. It was surprisingly elegant. She blushed and let the material fall back into place.

Was she really going to go through with this?

Accessories were scarce, of course. While packing for this trip, she hadn't realized she'd be in need of finer adornments—who would pack for a fight and think, *where's that necklace I love?* So she was stuck with a clean pair of gloves, and boots with laces to match.

It didn't matter what her hair or face looked like, for it would remain covered, as usual, to protect her from the cold. Besides, it shouldn't be her face the demon would be looking at.

A mirror wasn't necessary for her to realize this was a lackluster attempt at dressing for seduction. Everything she wore was made, in some

part, from edison fur—it was the only material that could keep her warm—and he'd already expressed his distaste for it. But it would have to do.

Marik leaned back against the familiar stake, hands behind him once more, with the same flimsy rope in place. A soldier entered, carrying a stool and set it down next to the dimming fire pit. With shaky hands, he added a few logs and then rushed away, sparing Marik an uneasy look as he went.

The day had been fairly productive—as productive as a day in captivity could be, anyway. He'd been able to learn quite a bit of the language by the simple act of observing those around him. Not enough to decipher complete sentences yet, but he could at least gather the gist of a conversation. It was sure to be useful, since no one spoke any other language that he could understand. Except that woman, of course.

She had proven distracting while she was near him, though. Even while they were silent he was too focused on her, rather than keeping to his task.

His curiosity had driven him mad. What was her name? Why does she speak a language of the stars when no one else could? What the hell was under that cloak?

Getting rid of her had been easy enough, but then keeping her in his sights had been a full-time occupation. He didn't know why, but if she disappeared from view—which she managed often—Marik couldn't concentrate till he knew where she was in the group. To keep tabs on his enemy, he reminded himself. Not because he feared for her life. The two guards had also been out of sight most of the day.

After his crude remarks to her earlier, Marik was genuinely surprised when the woman entered his tent. Oddly, something in the pit of his stomach relaxed at the sight of her.

She was still covered from head to toe in that fluff, but something was different: her outfit was tighter, revealing her figure and giving him an even better idea of what her body might look like under that damn fur.

Tempting.

A thick scarf tucked into her hood and hid her features. Her lovely eyes glimmered in the glow of the flames as she sauntered to the fire.

A chair had been placed close to the flames and he expected her to take it immediately, but she remained standing. She looked a bit uneasy. By her swift glances to the exit, he had the feeling she was contemplating leaving without a word, and the thought bothered him.

“Are you here to continue our conversation about how talented my tongue can be? I assure you it...” Marik trailed off as she finally sat. The fabric of her outfit parted around long shapely legs, coming together again just below the apex of her thighs.

His cock jerked at the sight and he wished she’d move this way a bit, only an inch more. She crossed her legs with a deliberate motion, causing the fabric to fold elegantly closed, but one slender thigh was revealed instead. Marik’s mouth went dry, while other parts of him sprang to life.

Her eyes gleamed with amusement and that alone gave her away.

Saucy chit.

Marik composed himself and tried to keep his eyes off her succulent pale skin.

Pale?

“Your skin isn’t blue, like your male counterparts.” He shrugged and gave her a leering smile. “Not that I’m complaining. I’m not really partial to blue.”

“How convenient for you.” Nadua had been nervous when she’d first walked into the demon’s tent. So much so that she hadn’t been able to

Speak at first.

How could she have thought this was a good idea?

She felt like a fool coming here. It was unlikely the demon would be tempted by her. And this jaunt could end up being incredibly embarrassing if any of the guards discovered her plan. Doubts continued to swirl in her head, and she had almost left without a word.

Then she'd seen lust in the demon's eyes and knew she could pull this off.

"Is that why you females need to cover your bodies? You haven't adapted to your environment properly?"

Ass.

"Oh th...we've adapted just fine." She tried to make her voice sensual, but feared she was doing a poor job of it. "Why don't you tell me a little about yourself?" She rubbed her crossed legs together for effect.

With alarming intensity, his gaze went directly to where she intended it to.

"Well, let me think," he began. "You already know I'm a demon, and I'm sure you've heard of the dangers of teasing one such as I."

Nadua swallowed, but kept her back straight and suppressed her rising alarm. *I can do this.*

He continued. "I'm a great warrior...and a genius when it comes to preparing food. My favorite color is clear. And I love your legs. Why don't you come closer so I can sink my teeth into them."

Irritation flashed through her, but she tamped it down. "You are a very good fighter. My men can attest to that. You've been trained, obviously. I find that attractive." Nadua was surprised at how steady her voice was as well as the accuracy of the statement. She rubbed the back of her fingers over her thigh. "I find myself wanting to know more about you. Perhaps we can...chat a little?"

He gave a slight nod, eyes riveted to her caressing movement. She could see by the bulge in his pants that her actions were inspiring the exact response she was going for. *Easy*.

“Can you tell me about the craft that brought you here?”

“A shuttle’s a shuttle. What else do you need to know? It gets you where you’re going, and in many cases back again.”

“And why did it bring you here?”

“Look, I know what you’re doing.” His voice went guttural. “And you have no idea what you’re tempting here.”

“Don’t I?” She was growing warm from the anxious rushing of her blood, induced by the knowledge of what she was about to do next. Somehow, she needed to calm herself down, but she was making progress with the demon. Stopping now was not an option.

She began removing her gloves, pulling at each finger and making sure he was watching as they slipped down her arm. Next came the shawl pelt that covered her shoulders and hid the deep V-neck of her outfit.

“That’s better. You were saying?”

His teeth were grinding. Nadua couldn’t tell if that was a good thing or not. Her pulse spiked at her own actions and her cheeks warmed. Good thing the demon couldn’t see that.

“Well, if you’re going to continue removing your clothing...perhaps we should have more logs brought in. Guard! More logs for the fire!”

“Shh!” Nadua shot forward, scrambling to gather her clothes, getting ready to redress if anyone entered. She would be mortified if she were caught trying to seduce a demon, even if she didn’t intend to go through with it.

“Let me guess. No one knows you’re here. Do you think it’s wise to rile a demon’s lust without backup, girly?”

“I think I can handle you.”

“Why don’t you untie these ropes and we’ll find out.” He stood as if she would do as he asked. “I would love to test your theory.”

Her eyes widened when she saw his bulge had grown bigger, straining against his pants. She swallowed heavily.

Damn, she was losing control of the situation. In one last attempt, she took a step closer, playing with the lip of her collar.

Heavy lidded, his emerald gaze dipped to her cleavage.

“I want to help you, demon,” she cooed. “I want to trust you. I just need you to tell me the truth.”

“And I just want to taste you. I don’t need my hands free to do that.”

Why was she breathing so hard?

She eyed his lips, looking for a hint of his fangs. “I’m afraid you’d bite me, first chance you get. I need something from you first. I need to know I can trust you. Tell me who you’re looking for?”

They were standing so close, if his hands weren’t tied behind him he could reach out and grab her. Nadua couldn’t help but imagine what that might feel like to be touched by him. Fathomless green eyes bore into hers with such intensity she knew she had him.

“You, luv. I’ve been searching for you all my life.” Sarcasm dripped from his words. He smirked.

“Bastard!”

“Come on, let us have a taste.”

Nadua retrieved her cleverly placed dagger, hidden by a nearly invisible thigh holster, and set the point at his throat.

“Wow, what else do you keep down there?”

His lack of concern was maddening.

“This was your last chance, demon. Tell me what I want to know, or else.”

“Or else what? You’ll remove your top? I think I can hold out for that.”

Nadua had never been so enraged by a single person in her entire life. With an irritated huff, she turned back toward the fire and slumped on the stool, silently admitting defeat. Slicing the demon's throat would have been gratifying, but irrational. She would learn all she needed to know. Eventually.

The few moments away from the fire had chilled her, though she hadn't realized it until now, and she rushed to replace her gloves and shawl.

"When we get back to the castle, you'll be turned over to Renzo. He lived through the first demon invasion, so I'm sure he'll know how to deal with you." Nadua glanced up when she heard a menacing snarl coming from the demon.

"Torture, you mean."

Nadua shrugged. "I suppose so." She had hoped to avoid it.

"And after all the torture, if I don't change my story, what will you do then?" In a flash, the previously lusty green irises morphed into an angry blood red.

Nadua stood with a gasp, not sure what was happening to him. The horns that peeked out of his brown hair began to alter their color as well, taking on the cast of burning embers. Razor-sharp fangs peeked out from his lips, twisted in rage.

This was how he had looked when he was tearing through her men.

"What are you doing?" She stepped backwards, stumbling into the chair. She could swear there was heat coming off him. When the demon's lips curled back to bear his razor-sharp fangs, she screamed, "Guards!"

SNEAK PEEK FROM TEMPTING THE DRAGON KING

DRAGON LORDS BOOK 1

TEMPTING THE DRAGON KING - CHAPTER 1

*F*ire rained down over the lush canopy of an ancient forest. Enemy ships streaked overhead as Tristan Okora and his kinsmen evaded the unceasing attacks in their more agile, yet equally powerful dragon forms.

Boom!

The pervading scent of burning oil rolled in on the heels of the explosion's percussion. Yet another terminally crippled ship descended in a death spiral. From his high altitude, Tristan watched with approval as his brothers, Lear and Gavin, removed their razor-like claws from the ship's proverbial jugular and pushed clear of the smoking carnage, soaring away before it scorched a flaming gash along the unsuspecting forest floor. He'd already taken out several ships the same way and was eager for the next.

Below, Faieara, blessed with the gift of defensive magic, had finally rallied to rise up and defend their precious home. With their combined strengths, these Kayadon interlopers were no match—

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than a dark shiver skittered up his spine. A harrowing roar cried out, and he knew without looking that his father was in danger. He banked hard to the right, looping around, searching wildly. Moments later, he caught a sight that shot a fistful of dread straight down his throat to land in the pit of his stomach. His father was on the run, flying erratically as he struggled to evade a

Kayadon ship in swift pursuit. This one was smaller than the rest and easily matched his every twist and turn, streaks of ammunition barely missing their target.

But his left wing was wounded! He couldn't keep up his pace much longer.

Working his wings with all his might, Tristan gave chase, catching up to land on the ships back with a resounding thud, his claws digging into the metal like hot butter—

But then his world flipped over on its side. His father was hit... falling....

...Falling...

...Falling...



One month later.

The heavy torc wrapped around Tristan Okora's neck like a cold snake suffocating its prey. His father's torc. The royal symbol of the Okora clan. How long before the responsibility of it swallowed him whole? He'd signed up for this slow torture, knowing full well he might never live up to his father's memory. He might never be good enough for his people. Might never be strong enough. Yet he was the only Okora stepping up to do what he must.

He gazed out at the inky expanse of space that seemed to go one for eternity, dotted by sparkling flecks of faraway light. Though there was nothing to indicate it, he knew they were approaching the outer edge of Evlon space.

Returning to the place of his father's demise had not been his preferred choice, but he had duties now that could not be shirked.

For the tenth time in the last hour, he reached up to touch the torc around his neck—he still wasn't used to the stiff metal against his skin. He was even less used to his clan mates referring to him as Your Highness or Your Majesty as opposed to the title of prince he'd grown up with. It always made his gut burn with violent guilt when they did. He wasn't accustomed to ruling and wasn't sure he ever would be.

"You look troubled, my son." His mother, Lady Edel—no longer queen, though many still referred to her by the title—came to stand next to him, looking every bit as regal and stately as she always did, with her blonde hair gathered neatly into a complicated knot and her sophisticated gown swaying perfectly with her movements. Her shieldmaiden guardian, Belinda, halted several feet away as though to give them a semblance of space, but the stout, grim woman was never far enough for Tristan's liking.

"Does Belinda need to be with you at all times? Do you no' feel save here on our own ship?"

"'Tis a matter of optics," replied his mother. "Displaying your soldiers is no' only a show of strength to your own people, but to enemy and ally alike."

That was exactly something his father would have said. Damn, but he missed the bastard.

"And," she continued, "it is more important now than ever to show strength. We are a family with three generations of royal lineage. Even still, people are wary of the new young king, watching, waiting to see who challenges you. Even a son of the great King Mar has much to prove."

Belinda made a crass noise in the back of her throat. Of agreement or distain? He wasn't sure. He hadn't exactly been the most dedicated of fledglings when it came to responsibilities of the crown.

"Plus," his mother continued. "She can fetch me drinks."

He glanced down at his mother for a moment, shaking his head, then returned his gaze to space.

Having just approached and overheard Lady Edel's remarks, Orik, Tristan's head of the guard and lifelong friend, slapped him on the back. "Is that why you keep *me* around?"

"I keep you around because your ugly mug amuses me."

"Best no' look in the mirror then. You'd laugh yourself to death."

Tristan simply grinned. Normally he'd invite a verbal sparring with Orik, but today was not a day for lightheartedness.

Orik seemed to sense his mood and turned serious. "We are in range to receive transmissions from Evlon. They sent an itinerary for the treaty signing and celebration."

The treaty signing was more symbolic than necessary, reaffirming the Dragon's alliance with the Faieara after they'd just won back a portion of their kingdom, thanks, in part, to the Okora clan.

"Very well," Tristan replied, his chest twisting at the memory of his father falling from the sky, dead before hitting the ground. The Kayadon ship that had taken him down, the one Tristan had failed to disable, shooting off into the distance and leaving his world crumbled in its wake.

The sharp burn of failure that had lived in his gut ever since reignited with a flourish, spreading along his sternum and attacking his heart. He swallowed the searing pain and focused on his own reflection.

"I understand your brother, Lear, is off preparing to run Phase Nine," said Orik, "but I feel like Gavin should have come."

"He abdicated the throne," Tristan reminded him. "He has no obligation to partake in these political ceremonies." Tristan held no ill will toward his eldest brother, who'd made it clear from an early age he had no interest in taking on the role of king. Which was why their father had focused on grooming Tristan instead. However, Tristan had expected his father to live many centuries more and had wrongly assumed he'd had

plenty of time to absorb his father's wisdom. As a result, much of his youth was spent in the pursuit of idle amusements: drinking, fighting, and women.

"Didn't you have a fling with the Faieara queen?" asked Orik, blunt as ever.

"That was a long time ago." Tristan shot him a stern look. "Her demon mate will not appreciate the reminder."

"Oh! I remember her." His mother sighed, smiling at the remembrance. "Kyrallyn. She was a lovely young lady. Your father and I had hoped the two of you would one day wed. It would have been marvelous, politically speaking."

"Fear not, Mother," he returned, tone lackluster. "It looks as if I will still wed for political reasons."

She picked invisible lint from her shoulder. "Yes, the daughter of Prince Gideon. What was her name? Princess Leanora?" Prince Gideon was brother to the king of a dragon clan that resided beyond the hills of the Okora clan. Over the years, there had been some bickering between their two clans, mostly over territory and resources. There were also burgeoning blood rivals. A royal marriage would help put an end to the tension.

"They've been staying at the castle," informed his mother. "Making themselves quite comfortable. As though the engagement is already settled. Tell me, have you accepted the girl yet?"

"Do you oppose the arrangement?" Tristan asked by way of avoidance. "I figured you would approve."

His mother lifted one delicate shoulder. "I just want you to be sure that it's what you want. A favorable marriage could lead to a stronger kingdom than ever. On the other hand, a miserable match could ensure the downfall of a nation just as surely as any war."

Tristan shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "To be honest, I hardly know the girl. We met a handful of times. She seems...amiable."

“She’s rumored to be one of the most beautiful creatures in the land,” Orik inserted. Tristian did not discount the claim. Leanora was extremely attractive. And she knew it.

“Remember, son, your father courted me for years before I agreed to marry him.” She loved recounting the tale of her courtship with King Mar, how she had made him work to win her heart. Constantly his father would refer to his wife as one of the most stubborn women he had ever encountered. She’d refer to him as the most persistent brute she had ever met. Tristan and his brothers used to roll their eyes at what was clearly unwanted parental flirting; now he’d kill to hear his father call his mother stubborn one last time. His mother’s eyes turned down, as if she were thinking the same.

His heart twisted for her loss.

Her sorrow, my fault.

“I may not have years.” He’d already been challenged by an upstart young buck looking to usurp the throne—on the day he’d returned to announce his father’s death. Tristian had been outraged by the lad’s lack of decorum and had taught him a lesson. The young dragon had retreated from their battle with an ego-check and more than a few wounds to lick.

Still, others would try. Tristan had not spent as much time exhibiting his strength to his clan as his father had, which was why no one had challenged King Mar. His dominance had been unquestionable. No one knew what Tristan was made of yet. Many might suppose he was weak, an easy target, softened by a life of privilege. If he had a strong mate from an equally formidable family, his crown would be solidified. Challengers would think twice.

As king, it was an option he must seriously consider, though his desire for the beautiful Leanora was lukewarm at best.

An alarm began to squeal. Tristan called to his pilot, “What’s happening?”

“Your Majesty”—cue the gut burn—“the ship’s sensors have picked up a single Kayadon ship approaching from the rear...fast.”

“What are they doing all the way out here?” Orik pondered aloud. “A scout, you think?”

Belinda replied, “If so, they are foolish to be this far out with no backup.”

“Whatever they’re up to, you can be sure it is no good. Battle stations!” Tristan called. “Hail them.”

“No response,” said one of the crew.

“They aren’t slowing,” said another.

Tristan ordered, “Send a warning shot.”

Seconds later, a pulsar torpedo made contact with the Kayadon ship. Whoever was controlling the ship made no effort to avoid the blast.

“No change in course,” a crewmember announced. “They haven’t even brought their weapons online.”

“Prepare to fire another warning. I want them alive if possible, so aim for their thrusters.”

His crew made short work of the Kayadon ships thrusters, knocking them dead with a few well-aimed charges. The ship now glided on its own momentum, tilting off kilter as it went.

“Scan for life.”

“I’m reading only one lifeform on board, Your Majesty.”

“Only one?” his mother replied, astounded. Even she knew that was unusual. Could this be a trap?

“One Kayadon can be deadly,” grated Tristan, his gaze flicking down to his mother. “Belinda, take my mother back to her quarters.”

While Belinda moved to obey, his mother planted her feet, eyes flashing with fiery defiance. “I think not.”

“Mother, please.”

“Have you forgotten who I am, son? I was leading armies while you were still weaning. I am not some whelp in need of sheltering, and I am quite comfortable where I am.”

“This is space, Mother. This is different.”

“Your majesty,” Belinda beseeched. “If this is an ambush—”

“Belinda, dear, if this is an ambush, then that sorry creature has his work cut out for him. They took our king from us, my husband, and our rage is deep. I will look into the face of our enemy and slice his head from his body myself.” His mother had two speeds: kind, motherly queen and ferocious shieldmaiden. This shieldmaiden wanted revenge as much as Tristan did.

Tristan felt the heat of her rage wafting from her body. So potent and full of malice that if she wasn’t so controlled, she’d have shifted into her dragon form. There was no arguing with her like this. And if his mother wanted the Kayadon’s throat, she would have it.

To his crew, Tristan ordered, “Pull the ship into the lower docking bay. Have all available guards meet us there, locked and loaded.”

TEMPTING THE DRAGON KING - CHAPTER 2

This is how I die, Juniper Jacobs thought to herself.

Alone, starving to death in an alien spaceship, barreling through space until the end of time...or until the ship crashed into a planet or an asteroid or a broiling-hot star. Eviscerated.

“What a way to go,” she muttered. If only her brother Jordan could see her now. He might just congratulate her on a righteously epic death. Perhaps he was looking down on her, or up, from wherever heaven was located here in space, if there really was such a thing as an afterlife.

June casually lounged in what she could only assume—from years of watching science fiction—was the captain’s chair, center stage in the high-tech command station, nibbling the last of her food reserves and staring out into space. Tiny stars gazed back at her, like she were an animal on display for their amusement. She sure hoped someone was getting a kick out of her situation.

After sucking the last little morsel from the plastic, she crumpled up the chocolate bar wrapper and tossed it to the graveyard of empty junk food carcasses at her feet and then licked her fingers clean, not willing to waste a single carb.

That was it. No more food. *Donezo*. “You really fucked up this time, June.”

Her own voice sounded hollow in the lonely metallic space. If only she'd packed more food for her *innocent* woodland hike in upstate New York where her bursting bladder had led her off the path, where the sun glinting off metal had lured her like a sparkling Pied Piper into what would ultimately be her tomb. All she had to look forward to now was a slow death from starvation. This alien spaceship, for that was what she'd determined it to be, was locked down tighter than Fort Knox. She could travel from the command station to a succession of hallways with too many doors that she couldn't open and the large bay room where she had first, stupidly, wandered in. What was it they said about curiosity and cats? She still wasn't sure if she had inadvertently pressed a button or if her mere presence had triggered the ship to take off, zooming into space as she screamed her lungs out and hung on for dear life.

For what must have been several days at least, she'd been wandering the halls, trying to figure a way out of this predicament, unable to read the strange symbols on the many dials and levers. Unable to find a kitchen or pantry or even a bed. Unable to call for help—though who would be able to save her? Earth's technology wasn't this advanced. Within the first few hours of flight, she'd said bon voyage to Earth's moon, tears still burning her incredulous eyes while pure terror choked sob after sob from her throat.

Now she was resigned to her fate...for the most part. There was no telling how far she was from Earth now. No one knew where she was. No one was coming to save her.

She fought the crippling despair, invoking the stoic, emotionless state that had protected her in her youth. Every now and again, a burst of determination crept in, and she worked to understand the ship's controls in hopes of saving her own ass; she hadn't survived her childhood to give up on herself now. Still, she figured it would take NASA scientists years to

reverse-engineer this craft. A grad student pursuing the field of child psychology had zero chance.

When feeling brave, she'd test random buttons because *what the hell? I'm going to die anyway*. Usually this sort of advanced scientific testing resulted in a low beeping that resembled a computer program returning an error. Sometimes a voice would blare over the intercom, foreign and grating, like a beast from nightmares. Sometimes the front window would become a screen displaying what, to her, were random images: an alien creature with antenna and bulging eyes that reminded her slightly of Stitch from *Lilo and Stitch*; a dark forest with Avatar-like plants; a river that could be located on Earth for all she knew; and endless images of planets.

Who knew all this life existed out there in the big wide universe? Too bad she'd never have the chance to tell anyone.

Growing tired, she snuggled up on the hard floor, using her backpack and flannel shirt as a makeshift pillow and blanket, and dozed off...only to be jolted awake by a loud siren and a stern voice over the intercom asking her to respond—

Asking her to respond!

Was she hallucinating or had the geniuses on earth actually somehow managed to track her down?

With an instant jolt of adrenaline, she jumped up and rushed to the front window, eyes darting wildly over the black expanse, but nothing was there beyond the billions of stars. She waited....waited...

Nothing.

She turned in place. "Hello? I'm here! I'm here! Hello?" But the voice had gone quiet. Had the voice been a dream? No. She couldn't believe she'd gone insane yet.

Lunging for the closest computer console, she frantically pressed anything that looked as though it might let her be heard. "Hello? Can you hear me? My name is June—"

An explosion rocked the ship, knocking her off her feet. She crashed down, landing on her side as a scream ripped from her lungs. *What the hell was that?* If nothing else, it was proof someone was out there. Someone had come for her. She didn't think past that as she sprang to her feet and resumed pressing every button in sight, hoping to let whoever it was that she was here.

Something outside caught her eyes. Icy dread shimmied up her spine. She got the sickly impression that the ship closing in was not of Earth.

This wasn't a rescue; this was an abduction. "Oh god! They're going to probe and dissect me!" She'd have preferred evisceration.

A volley of explosions knocked her to the ground once more and the soft hum of the ship that she'd grown so used to snapped into dead silence, the rushing of her blood now the only thing she could hear. She crawled along the floor toward her backpack where she retrieved a small Swiss army knife that had belonged to Jordan.

Suddenly darkness righted. She screeched. Then a bright floodlight erupted from somewhere—the foreign ship—and illuminated every inch of space around her in a green hue.

Like a carnivorous beast slowly pulling its prey to its doom. Closer... closer...

Closer...

Her body shook with the most potent terror that had ever taken hold of her. As if she could wish herself out of existence, she huddled on the ground, clutching the only weapon she had, a two-inch blade with a pathetically dull edge.

Like a great hungry mouth cutting into the face of that ship, a large panel slowly opened and her craft was enveloped—a mere insect by comparison. Moments later, a jostling in the floor beneath her feet indicated the ship had settled. Noises sounded, echoing from somewhere. Tools? Was someone drilling through the hull? Was that a hatch opening?

Then came the sound of marching feet, dozens, hundreds maybe. Who could tell? All she knew was an army of aliens were coming for her. But wait. Hadn't they spoken English? Yet she couldn't deny her body perceived a threat.

Her heart pounded. *What should I do?*

Too late. They were in front of her, dressed in dark gear, their faces covered, their bodies surprisingly shaped like humans with two arms and two legs. They resembled soldiers, each carrying a weapon the way one would carry a rifle, but these were not rifles. They were something else. Something more advanced.

Until now, the idea of a rescue must have lived in her somewhere, because when the soldiers surrounded her, weapons drawn, the last little bit of hope drained from her body, and she closed her eyes...waiting.

"Make way." A deep voice resonated from behind the soldiers. She glanced up, still surprised to find she could understand him. Was he... could they be from Earth after all? Then she saw him—a massive male with a perfectly toned physique that many athletes would kill for, shoving his way through the throng of soldiers, his expression full of viscous wrath.

He didn't wear a uniform like the others. Instead he wore a cap-sleeve tunic that was laced down the front with thick cord and held tight to his waist by a wide belt with an ornate metal buckle. His hair was a bit ruffled and framed his face. And, oh, boy, was he brutally beautiful. The devil himself would be envious; chiseled jaw, sculpted cheekbones, and stern eyes that could slay with a look.

Perhaps he was the devil. His stormy gray eyes burned with menace and promised no mercy.

TEMPTING THE DRAGON KING - CHAPTER 3

A bit of cold vengeance was chased away as Tristan glowered down at the tiny female crouched on the floor, terrified and confused. She looked like a wild thing with her tangled mane of dark wavy hair and dirt-smudged skin. Wild and gorgeous. She wore a pair of dark-green shorts that exposed her shapely legs and a white strappy shirt that displayed an impossibly luscious figure that could only have been yanked from his most lascivious dreams.

He shook his head, surprised by his thoughts.

Was this hapless creature the lifeform they'd detected? He caught sight of a small blade clutched in her fist and narrowed his gaze at the paltry threat. "Where is the Kayadon?"

He noticed that she wore no shoes. Her socks were sullied as though she'd been wearing them for weeks. And was that the face of a whiskered animal embroidered on the sides?

"Th-the what?" Her stark eyes widened up at him as if he were Death in the flesh, her irises the color of a shallow lagoon.

It was recently rumored that the Kayadon could shift forms, much like his own people, but that notion was shrouded in mystery. Was this a guise? A beguilingly beautiful guise meant to soften him and force him to lower his guard?

He couldn't take the chance. He raised his blaster.

She squeaked and curled into herself, bringing her legs to her chest and covering her head with her arms.

"Doona lie to me, female. Your ship is headed to Evlon. I demand to know why."

Her voice came out high and thin. "I-I don't know what Evlon is. The ship just took off. I got stuck inside. I didn't mean to. Please don't kill me!"

Tristan's mother stepped forward and placed her palm on the barrel of his blaster, encouraging him to lower it. "Enough, Tristan. Can't you see she's frightened out of her wits?"

"This could be a trick." When his mother moved to approach the female, Tristan gripped her by the elbow. "Doona be fooled."

"And you doona *be* a fool, son. There is no danger here. This is but a frightened girl." Then she pulled free of his grip and strode forward to kneel by the shaking female.

He put her in his blaster's sights once more and, following his example, his brigade did the same, some even charging their weapons in preparation to fire if the female made a move against their former queen.

The whirring sound brought his mother's fierce gaze around. "I said enough! Lower your weapons or I will lower them for you."

After years of taking orders from her, the soldiers did as commanded. Tristan was not yet sole commander. And he was not yet ready to obey. Neither was Belinda. His mother's piercing gaze landed on each of them in turn. He implored her with a look, but she was resolved. Finally, the two lowered their weapons. Yet Tristan remained tense, his finger kissing the trigger.

"Now then..." His mother turned back to the girl. "You're okay. No one will harm you. See?"

The girl looked up, eyes glossy, cheeks damp. She regarded the former queen, that blade still clutched in her trembling fist. Tristan resisted the urge to raise his blaster once more. He didn't like his mother so close to a potential threat, especially one that might be Kayadon in disguise.

Then something enigmatic seemed to pass between the two females, and the strange girl dropped her little blade to throw her arms around his mother and began sobbing uncontrollably.

His mother petted the girl's hair. "It's okay, dearling. You're safe now."

It sounded as if the girl was trying to say something, but the words were garbled around her hysteria.

"Calm yourself," his mother cooed. "Let's get you off this ship and into a warm bath. Then you can tell me all about it." Pulling the girl to stand, his mother guided her past Tristan and the row of befuddled soldiers. Belinda followed, giving him a look of assurance that she would not let anything happen to her mistress.

Baffled and aggravated, and weirdly frustrated, Tristan regained control of his troops. "Get me the ship's logs and let no corner of this ship go unsearched. I want to know what the hell is going on."

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